

# Birchandra Public Library

---

Class No. F

Book No. M-898

Accn. No. 7316

Date 2.8.56

**Library Form No. 4**

This book was taken from the Library on the date  
last stamped. It is returnable within 14 days.

# **DEAD OF SUMMER**

**DANA MOSELEY**

**LONDON  
THE BODLEY HEAD**

**First published in England 1915**

**Printed in Great Britain by  
BUTLER AND TANNER LTD, FROME, SOMERSET,  
for JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD LTD,  
28 Little Russell St, London, WC1**



## CONTENTS

PART ONE	<i>Friday Night</i>	9
PART TWO	<i>Wednesday</i>	17
PART THREE	<i>Thursday</i>	67
PART FOUR	<i>Friday</i>	113

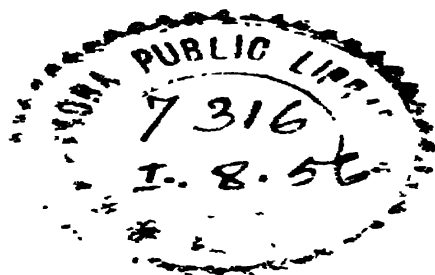


**For Barbara**



PART ONE

*Friday Night*





## *Friday Night*

**F**OR THE third straight day the sultry air hung motionless over the sweltering mid-western city. Already the effects of its subtle tyranny had become evident in the altered temper of the populace. People who were normally placid became choleric, and those who were choleric by nature became mean. Incidents developed out of trifles as motorists driving over the soft tar of the boulevards were stimulated to rage by petty discourtesies. To make matters worse, a blunt, gamy scent from the stockyards crawled sluggishly north and west into the suburbs, afflicting even the aloof citizens of Fairlawn. It was a trying time for all the quarter-million inhabitants, but particularly so for the police force.

An hour or so before midnight, Police Car 34 was parked beside a drive-in on Lodge Street. Its two occupants, both older men as policemen go, sat drinking mugs of root beer while they passively watched the girls in shorts who flitted from car to car, seemingly unaffected by the heat. A fat pedestrian was seen to waddle in from beyond the circle of cars. He ordered a root beer, drank it down at once, and asked for another. When this was gone, he ordered the mug refilled once more. There looked to be a certain futility in the operation, as if no matter how fast his hand moved, it could not possibly replace the sweat that poured out of him, drenching his shirt and forming a dark line an

inch or two below his belt. After the third, he turned and walked away.

A few seconds later, an indignant shout broke the silence, followed by sounds of scuffling and angry voices.

The two policemen glanced wearily at one another. From their expressions, it was obvious they shared a common thought. These two had been together longer than any pair on the force. By all they were known simply as John and Ed. Since the noise had occurred on his side, it tacitly fell to the one called Ed to find out what the fuss was about. With obvious reluctance, he got out of the car.

He was not tall, but his appearance was formidable. Partly this was due to his mustache, which somewhat resembled a soiled toothbrush and seemed to bristle whenever he charged into a new scene. He stepped around from behind an automobile to find the fat man grappling with two teenage youths.

'Well now,' he said with forced belligerence, 'what have we got here?'

The sight of the uniform was enough to halt the scrap, though the fat man continued to be indignant.

'They poured root beer on me,' he complained angrily. 'I was just walking past the car here and——'

'It was an accident, officer,' one of the boys interrupted. 'I never seen the guy 'til it was too late.'

'Accident. Hah!' He stared ruefully at his wet shirt, though in truth it looked only slightly wetter than before. But he had been getting the worst of the fight. So he took the presence of the officer as an excuse to limp away with as much dignity as he was capable of



under any conditions. The two youths got back in their car.

The policeman was grinning now. He hadn't been in the mood to get a sweat up anyway. As he started back toward the car, he saw that the headlights were on and that one of the girls was carrying off their tray. He quickened his step.

'What's the idea?' he demanded. 'I wasn't through.'

'Jump in,' the other said briefly.

He slid into the seat, and the tires spun in the crushed rock as the car roared off in low. When they had gone a couple of blocks, he glanced at his companion.

'Not another brawl, I hope.'

The other shrugged. 'If there was, it's over now. Seems a woman's been strangled.'

'Oh-oh. North Twenty-fourth?'

'Nope. Trenton Street.'

He sat tight-lipped at the wheel. You couldn't count on the siren to freeze all the traffic this time of night. There was sure to be some blundering drunk with a loud radio. Although it was approaching midnight, the traffic continued to be moderately heavy. It was much too hot to sleep.

'When you think about it,' Ed offered pontifically, 'it's funny there ain't more murders in this weather. Sometimes I feel like shootin' the old lady myself, just for gettin' over on my side of the bed.'

The other didn't reply. He turned the car north off Lodge. They were in one of the oldest parts of the city now. The headlights, which had been ineffectual in the diffuse brilliance of the thoroughfare, suddenly became dominant here, flashing swiftly across the

ornamented porticos and circular towers of the ancient houses. These places always looked especially preposterous in the spring and summer. In late autumn their decrepitude became a part of the general decay, and for a short time they even took on a melancholy dignity. The area around Trenton Street was something else again. It was old too, but it had been from the beginning more commercial. When they turned into Trenton, they had no difficulty spotting the address. Another police car had beaten them there.

Both men got out. It was a two-story brick structure with a squarish, indestructible quality about it, separated from the buildings on either side by a space of no more than seven or eight feet.

'Looks like the commotion must be in that apartment up there,' one of them said. He pointed to a corner window which framed the massive posterior of what was unquestionably an officer of the law.

The street door was unlocked. Inside, they climbed the narrow staircase, one close behind the other. At the top of the steps and a little to the left, a door stood part-way open. A small white card was attached to it by a thumb tack. On this was printed neatly in ink, *Mr. and Mrs. Charles Pettigrew.*

One of the policemen gave the door a push. As it swung open, the man sitting on the window sill glanced up with a grin.

'Hello, boys. Have a flat tire?'

Sourly ignoring this jibe, they both appraised the surroundings. A single bulb glared from the ceiling, imparting a depressing nakedness to the objects beneath it. The room, like an aging woman caught without

corset or make-up, suffered grossly under the stark light. In front of the door the rug was worn down to the base, and a threadbare path led diagonally to the kitchen. Across the room, an overstuffed chair, which should have been allowed to spend out its days in the obscurity of a dark corner, displayed the edge of a bare coil below the cushion. Beside this, under a sheet, was the body, the only decently-concealed object in the room.

'Strangled, eh?'

'Have a look, Ed,' invited the cop on the window sill.

Ed pulled back the sheet, pursed his lips, and dropped it again. 'Family quarrel, no doubt.'

'Nope. The husband's not even around.'

'Any theories, then?'

'Theories . . . Theories.' He tested the word cautiously, as though it were something vague and foreign that had no business in the vocabulary of a cop. 'Sorry, Ed, I guess I don't *have* any theories. We figure we got the murderer, though. That's almost as good.'

The other reddened slightly. 'I suppose that's the signed confession there in your hand.'

'This? Oh no, this is something pretty interesting. An unfinished letter I found on the desk here. Take a look,' he offered, handing it over to the two newcomers.

It was a sheet of lavender stationery with the name *Catherine Pettigrew* embossed in gold at the top. The handwriting was neat, though somewhat uneven.

Darling:

How soon are you coming home? Is it possible that you left only day before yesterday? So much has happened. These last two days have been the most terrible in my life. I'm frightened and I need you. Above all, I want you to

know that I haven't done anything wrong. A ridiculous little incident occurred Wednesday, so trivial it would hardly seem worth mentioning. Now a man is trying to extort money from me, and that's why I want you to know the facts from me first. I know how jealous you are, but I wouldn't be telling you this if I'd really done anything wrong, would I, darling?

It started only a little over forty-eight hours ago—on Wednesday afternoon . . .

That was all. When they had finished, the two policemen gazed in unison at the lump beneath the sheet.

'It'd be interesting to know all the facts behind this,' Ed remarked.

'Yes,' his companion agreed. 'Wouldn't it though?'

**PART TWO**

*Wednesday*



## *Wednesday*

### *1*

**T**HE FACTS were perhaps more complicated than the officers might have supposed, for this is scarcely more the story of Mrs. Pettigrew than of the four or five persons who entered her life almost simultaneously and in an extremely curious way on a hot afternoon early in June.

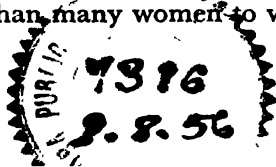
On Wednesday at a quarter to four, Catherine Pettigrew happened to be in her apartment on Trenton Street. With the shades drawn and the fan humming in monotone, she sat watching a fly make its way slowly along the window sill. Mrs. Pettigrew continued for some time in this relaxed position, not because she was especially contemplative at this hour, but simply because she was too hot to do anything else. The mohair sofa absorbed the heat from her body and gave it damply back. It occurred to her that she might find the wooden rocker more comfortable, but she noted that the chair was beyond the range of the fan. She hadn't the energy, at least not the mental energy, to make herself get up and detach the fan and plug it in at the other side of the room.

Taking a cigarette from the pack on the end table, she put it to her lips, gave a sigh, and tossed it down again. It was less than five minutes since the last one had been crushed in the tray. She believed that to become anything approaching a chain smoker was to

surrender, to give in to the heat and the boredom, and this she was determined not to do. For Mrs. Pettigrew the hot spell was probably even more of an ordeal than for the others, because it was the first summer in her twenty-one years that she had spent away from England. Up until the previous winter she had not realized that there was a climate peculiar to the center of a continent, where it was an abnormal year when the variation in temperature did not exceed a hundred degrees. There were occasionally raw winter days at home, and often a week during the summer that was uncomfortably warm. But never anything like this.

Rubbing the perspiration from her forearm, she examined the flesh. Almost at once it became dotted again with tiny points of sweat which expanded, merged, and fell in drops onto her gingham dress. It occurred to her that perhaps it had been a mistake to draw the shades. There were only two windows in the small room, and while the deepened shadows gave an illusion of coolness, this was an effect that pleased only the eye. Getting to her feet, she went over to the window.

In low heels, Catherine stood only an inch over five feet. But when people called her 'little Mrs. Pettigrew,' they intended the phrase to include more than a definition of stature. Her manner of dress, for one thing, hardly suggested a mature married woman. Except for rare, formal occasions, she was never seen in anything but a simple cotton frock and sandals. There were other things about her, too, which made people think of her as hardly more than a school girl. If she was not precisely beautiful, she certainly missed the mark by no more than many women to whom this in-





exact term is applied. She had dark hair and a round, pleasant face which bore a perpetual look of guilelessness. Being aware of this, she contributed to it by opening her mouth in mild astonishment whenever someone said anything even slightly out of the ordinary. It was a gesture which won most people instantly, and sometimes in a self-critical mood little Mrs. Pettigrew considered herself quite unscrupulous.

After she had let up the shade, Catherine stood for a minute looking down into the narrow street, which was deserted now except for an old man standing under the awning of the grocery store across the way. A mongrel dog rested there beside him, and the animal's tail switching listlessly at flies was the only thing on the street that moved. Somewhere a clock sounded four times. At the same time chimes began to ring on College Tower several blocks to the north. Not until recently had Catherine realized that they were living so close to a university, for the shabby academic buildings were almost undistinguishable from the commercial structures which surrounded them.

Closing her eyes, she tried to make herself think seriously of dinner. But dinner alone was not a prospect worth eliciting much mental effort. Her husband had gone East that morning to be interviewed for a new job. Since his discharge several months ago, Charles had continued working for the Air Force—first in England, and recently at a post near this city. Supposedly, it was a temporary position, giving him some experience while he looked for something with more money in it. Catherine hoped so. Not merely because they were living a marginal existence—she was used to

that—but she did not feel that she could ever become accustomed to this climate.

The sound of someone coming up the stairs stirred the hope that she might have a visitor. Anyone, even tiresome Mrs. Folger who occupied the first floor, would be welcome today. Peering around the edge of the open door, she met the surprised glance of the G.I. student, Mr. Oblonski, who lived alone in the other second-floor apartment. Pausing at the top of the steps, he stared at her dumbly for a moment.

Something about his expression nearly caused Catherine to burst out laughing, but she managed to check it. Under the circumstances, she felt she could hardly turn away without saying anything.

‘It must be terribly hot walking out there in the streets.’

‘Yes, it is,’ Roy Oblonski said. He was not a bad-looking young man. He was of average height and build. The only peculiarity about his appearance was his eyes, which were set too close together for his fleshy face. They gave him, especially when he frowned, a somewhat perplexed look. This unfortunate effect was abetted by his manner of speaking, gravely deliberate even when dealing with trifles.

‘Yes, it is,’ he repeated, ‘terribly hot.’

Catherine fanned herself ineffectually with her open hand. ‘Lord, it’s bad enough in here out of the sun.’

‘Yes, it’s bad no matter where you go today.’

Not wishing to push this tedious conversation further, Catherine stepped back and closed the door. It occurred to her that in all the time she had been living in the same building with Mr. Oblonski, this was the most wordy discussion they’d ever had. He never spoke to

anyone, except once in a while to Mrs. Folger. And then only because she trapped him in the hall to force onto the poor fellow an opinion on world affairs, or on some book she was reading. Catherine had encountered the two of them in the hallway several times. Mrs. Folger had been chattering vivaciously, while poor Mr. Oblonski nodded over and over, his serious, chubby face fastened to hers in a kind of desperate earnestness. Mrs. Folger seemed rather stuck on him, although Catherine could not imagine why. Being English, she was accustomed to taciturn men, but simple reticence did not explain his strange manner. Whenever they met on the stairs, he held his head aloof, not out of superiority, but seemingly as a measure of defense. This rather amused Mrs. Pettigrew. As she had remarked to her husband, one might have thought she had the power of seduction in a glance. Now that she thought about it, Catherine recalled that her husband hadn't considered the remark very funny.

The student closed his door. She would have forgotten him at once if she had not been startled at the sounds which came through from his room. It was not the character of the noises, which were in no way mysterious, but the distinctness with which she could discern each footstep, the opening of a drawer, a glass being set with a click in its metallic container above the wash bowl. Originally, the two apartments had been a single unit. After the war, the owner, eager to do something for the boys, had ordered the door between the rooms sealed shut, a patriotic maneuver which, incidentally, had nearly doubled his income from the second floor.

Never before, however, had Mrs. Pettigrew noticed how clearly sound passed from one apartment to the other. Ordinarily, during the day, she was in the habit of keeping the radio turned on. This had doubtless had the effect of subduing the less strident noises from the next room. It was turned off now only because the fan interfered with the reception. She heard him slide back a chair and sit down. Then she ceased to think of him altogether.

One of the most disheartening things about the heat was what it did to time. The long, dull, empty afternoon seemed to be stretched out interminably like something flaccid and lifeless. After four, when the sun was already declining, the temperature was only reaching its climax. At this hour, even people who claimed to be immune sat gasping on their front steps, fanning themselves with the afternoon paper. Catherine drew the wooden rocker in front of the fan and began very slowly to tilt backward and forward. The whirling blades tried to thrash life into the sluggish atmosphere, but she found in the fan's hot, sickly breath little comfort. As she rocked, Catherine tried to bring into vivid conception the cold spray of the sea near Brighton where she had so often stood in early summer until her clothes were drenched and she was eager to come in by the fire. Instead, quite illogically, she was attacked by the dismal recollection of an idiot girl at home who used to rock back and forth in exactly this way, hour on end, because life had nothing more exciting to give her. Catherine lurched forward, propelling herself out of the chair. She was resentful that mere elevation of temperature could reduce one's life to such a state of vapid pointlessness.

She went into the kitchen and turned on the faucet. While she waited for the first rush of lukewarm water to drain away, her eye moved to the bottle of whiskey which her husband kept on the lower cupboard shelf. He was accustomed to mixing himself a highball after coming in from work at night, dusty and discouraged. It perked him up noticeably, so that he was usually in decent spirits by dinnertime. As for herself, Catherine had not tasted liquor more than three times in her life, the last occasion being on their honeymoon when she had drunk several cocktails. She remembered the rather pleasant, bodiless feeling it had given her.

Uncapping the bottle, she poured out nearly a quarter of a glass and drank it in one swallow. The unexpectedly repulsive taste shocked her into tears. She thrust her head under the faucet and frantically sucked in the cool water. Afterwards, she picked up the bottle and studied its label in dismay, wondering what pleasure her husband could possibly find in anything so disagreeable. Returning the bottle to the shelf, she went back into the living-room and found her cigarettes.

At first the whiskey made her, if anything, hotter than ever. Slowly, though, she began to notice that she did not mind the heat quite so much. But the bodiless effect she had hoped for did not come. In fact, the increased perspiration on her stomach and thighs made her even more conscious of her body. Suddenly she stood up and began to unbutton her dress. When she had taken it off, she laid it on the back of the chair. Next, she reached down to remove her slip, peeling it swiftly from the moist skin. This she tossed down beside the dress. Then she stepped in front of the fan. In her

panties and bra, Mrs. Pettigrew revealed a fullness of figure which, because of the careless way she wore her clothes, had rather startled her husband on their wedding night. Balancing easily, despite her mild inebriation, she pointed one slender foot toward the center of the stream. With rapid evaporation came coolness. As she stood in this way, bathing her white, bare leg, she experienced a rising surge of exhilaration which was both mental and sensual.

Catherine was not vain, but as she watched her foot tilt forward in its habitual feminine assignment of making the leg appear more graceful, she could not help regarding her figure appreciatively. As people often do who are unaccustomed to the effect of alcohol, she became entranced by an odd aspect of the familiar. Observing a delicate quiver beneath her fine skin, she found it a remarkable fact that she had only to move one toe to provoke a quick ripple all along the limb. Then the giddiness in her brain disturbed her balance, and she lowered her foot in order to steady herself.

Crossing over to the window, she examined the thermometer which was attached to the frame outside. The red column stood at one hundred and three. Curiously, she was delighted to see that the temperature had broken past a hundred. It seemed to give her previous wretchedness a scientific foundation, and she could imagine the sympathetic remarks of her friends back home when they read her next letter. Furthermore, it heightened her jubilation to reflect that she had come triumphantly through the worst that the climate had to offer.

As she stood there, Catherine became conscious that

someone was moving very slowly along the side-walk below. She glanced down to encounter the upturned gaze of a tall young man wearing a bill cap. When their eyes met, he stopped.

For what she did then Mrs. Pettigrew could never possibly have found any sensible explanation. Afterwards she could only suppose that she had been overcome by a wild, drunken impulse. Perhaps it was this, or the effect of the heat, which was itself a kind of intoxicant. Or it was conceivable that she only wished to include the man in her momentary peak of exultancy. As she stood in full view before the low window, little Mrs. Pettigrew lifted the corners of her mouth in a pensive smile.

Almost immediately she realized her gross indiscretion and stepped back from the window. Even though she had meant nothing by the gesture, she realized it was a foolish thing to do. However, the incident had been so brief and inconsequential that she quickly ceased to dwell on it. With much sharper poignancy came the realization that, as the elation produced by the alcohol wore away, she was beginning to feel torpid and uncomfortable again. It was not quite four-thirty. Dropping into the lounge chair, she listened to the gathering voices of the late afternoon traffic, and wished that something would happen.

## 2

For ten minutes, perhaps longer than that, the man stood in a shaded doorway, his narrow body tense, his eyes fixed on Mrs. Pettigrew's window. In all this time

he did not move, except once to transfer a small package from one moist hand to the other. And once he reached between the buttons of his shirt, laying his hand over his chest, as though to dampen an instrument gone convulsively out of control. On closer observation, there was a peculiarity in the man's gaze not altogether accounted for by his fanatical concentration. The pale eyes had a flat, transparent quality, as if some vital constituent in them were missing. This, and the sweat running streakedly down his bony face, gave him the look of a person dumbly obsessed by fear.

Pulling his bill cap low over his eyes, he shifted furtively in both directions in the way a man might do who suspects he is being followed. He was not so extraordinarily tall as he first appeared, for his height was emphasized by his linear build. But his hands, which were no wider than a woman's, seemed to possess a nervous strength exceeding the structural endowments of bone and muscle. After a time, he stepped out and moved away from the building. He proceeded with reluctance, glancing back repeatedly over his shoulder, refusing to let go altogether until he had turned the corner.

As he began to walk more rapidly, an odd, jerky motion of his body became apparent. His head bobbed awkwardly, so that he seemed at each step to be on the verge of stumbling. This clumsy gait, as well as his disproportionate height, suggested that his history must have contained a period of rapid growth which the higher centers had never fully consolidated. After he had gone several blocks, he turned in under a sign that read: *Schmidt's Pet Shop*.



The proprietor, a tiny bald-headed man, came forward from the rear of the store. He smiled languidly as he recognized the messenger.

'Well, Walter, this is good of you,' he said, taking the package and laying it on the counter. 'I was afraid I'd have to make a trip back to the hotel myself. I appreciate this very much.'

There was a trace of over-impeccability about Mr. Schmidt. His bow tie was squared off neatly below his fragile chin, and gold links secured his white, starched cuffs. Possibly he felt that the indelicate mixture of animal scents which greeted his customers' noses demanded an extra touch of grandeur on his part. Reaching into his pocket, he brought out a quarter. With an air of boredom, which indicated that such generosity was the customary thing with him, he dropped it in the other's palm.

'Something for your trouble, Walter.'

The tall man pocketed the quarter in silence, and turned away. As he passed in front of the parrot's perch, the bird stretched, shook his wing, and began to screech. But today Walter hurried past without even turning his head.

Back on Trenton Street once more, he slipped into the same doorway. This time, however, he did not linger. The traffic was increasing now. Men were returning from work and the children were coming in to dinner. The doorway, which led to the apartments above the grocery store, was a bad place for a stranger to be seen loitering. When a man carrying a lunch pail brushed past him with a suspicious glance, Walter lowered the bill of his cap and went briskly toward home.

Home for Walter was the furnace room of the Castle Hill Hotel. This, despite its ugliness, was one of the most comfortable places in the whole city. In summer it was quite cool, and in the winter, while others were warming frigid sheets with hot-water bottles, Walter often lay with the quilt thrown back, watching the live red coals in the grate. The Castle Hill was not a large establishment. Besides keeping the fire going in the cold weather, he took care of the trash, assisted the plumber, and ran errands for the manager. In return, he received his bed, meals in the kitchen, and fifteen dollars a week. These duties Walter performed with no evidence either of boredom or pride. Because the mechanics of anything presented a certain complexity to his mind, it often took him hours to complete a simple task. But no one complained. And whenever he was not working, he could usually be found with his shoes off, stretched out on his cot in the furnace room.

In his two years at the hotel, Walter had not made a friend, but neither, on the other hand, had he ever provoked anyone to enmity. Although people avoided him, this was not because he was considered in any way unstable or treacherous. He simply did not evoke pronounced feelings. Those who thought of him at all regarded him with a kind of distant pity, such as one feels for any lonely being: Few people ever ventured into Walter's basement room, but he did not mind. This fact emphasized his sovereignty over that part of the building.

In the summer, when the furnace did not require his attention, he often had much time on his hands. Occasionally people gave him stacks of Western magazines

and comic books. The Westerns, after long, thoughtful study of the bright pictures on the covers, he silently consigned to the trash box. One of the cooks, observing this performance, concluded that Walter could not read. This, in fact, was not exactly the case. He could make out most of the words, only the abnormally limited borders of his imagination did not permit him to soar in fancy beyond the printed page. The comic books fared better, although these, too, he examined without much interest, moving doggedly from square to square, as if each were a separate picture, unrelated to the others. Usually he just slept, or lay with open eyes, staring upward at the maze of pipes which ran along the ceiling.

At no time in his twenty-six years had Walter ever been on intimate terms with another human being. However, except for two occasions, the world had not treated him with real violence or hostility. One of these incidents should never have occurred at all.

During the war, an unpardonably lax-draft board ordered his induction, and he was sent off to a reception center. Even at this he might have been swallowed up in the sprawling turmoil of the camp, becoming nothing more troublesome than a mildly maladjusted nonentity, fit for latrine duty and permanent K.P. But on the drill field, Walter's clumsiness made him the butt of the outfit. He was the victim of numerous practical jokes, all of which he took in sullen silence. Then, on his sixth night in camp, an incident occurred which provoked a climax to Walter's army career. Late in the evening, a barracks joker unfastened the springs of his cot so that it collapsed the instant he sat down. Walter's

frenzied reaction was as much to the accumulation of indignities as to this one offense. Grasping the soldier in the next bed, he choked the man until he fainted, and only let go when he was pulled away by a half-dozen soldiers, who beat him without mercy and kicked him down the barracks steps. Walter spent the next several days in the guardhouse, sore and embittered. Soon it was all over. He was sent home on the train, along with an effeminate young man, whose sweet, excessively solicitous manner puzzled Walter as much as the cruelty of the others.

The other incident was even more perplexing in that it had occurred at a younger age. The fact that physical development had so drastically outstripped his mentality might not in itself have handicapped Walter in his backwoods home country, but nature had done other unjust things to him. He was slightly tongue-tied. Words came out of his mouth in a way that made people look at him queerly. Lacking the physical requisites for inconspicuousness, his early defense had been an aggressive unsociability which had not set at all well with the inhabitants of a town of less than three hundred. He had quit school at fourteen to work at various menial jobs around the town. Because of his size, employers expected undue demonstrations of strength, which Walter had always done his best to provide, since it was the one thing he could count on to bring him praise. When he was seventeen years of age, something happened which brought his life there to an end.

He had been chopping wood for the postmaster who lived at the edge of town. One day, as he was working,

little girl of nine or ten came up to watch. At first he had ignored her, until she began talking to him solemnly, at great length, in a way no one ever talked to Walter. She asked his opinion on the new shoes she was wearing, and did not seem surprised at his speech. She even spoke admiringly of his height. If she were as tall as he, she remarked, she would pick an apple from the branch above their heads.

His action in response to this was described afterward as harmless, perverted, evil, and generous by a swelling group of onlookers. He had seized her and lifted her, but only playfully, asserted some. As for the little girl, she sobbed throughout the night, but she was known to possess a melodramatic streak. Even her father could not be sure any real indignity had been done. The outcome was that Walter was given five dollars by the sheriff and told to leave town. After that, he had drifted about for a few years, picking fruit and doing odd jobs until he had found a home at last in the Castle Hill Hotel.

Ordinarily at this hour, Walter stopped in at the kitchen for his evening meal. Today, however, he was not hungry. He went directly to his room in the basement. Taking off his shoes, he lay face down on the bed. The stimulus of the excitement having died away, Walter felt extremely tired. He fell asleep almost at once.

When he awoke after an hour, he rolled over on his side and stared into the murky recesses of the room. There were no windows here. The only illumination came from the doorway, a pale streak of light on the other side of the furnace. As a rule, he did not like to lie

awake without turning on the light above his bed. Walter had always hated the dark. But he made no move to raise up. Instead he lay there on his side, motionless, his head turned toward the huge cold furnace, which would not burn for him until late in October.

His eyes narrowed slightly. Under normal circumstances there was nothing really sinister about his appearance, but in the feeble light, the room bore an oppressive resemblance to a dungeon. As he leaned forward, his pallid face took on the peculiarly obsessed expression of a demented prisoner greedy for some evasive recollection. Never in Walter's life had a woman, even fully dressed, looked him full in the face and smiled.

After a long time, he swung his legs to the floor and reached under the bed for his shoes.

### 3

Unluckily for Mrs. Pettigrew, there were two persons beside Walter who happened to have observed her impulsive exhibition that afternoon. One of these was Myra Folger, who lived in the apartment downstairs.

Shortly after four, she had gone across the street to the grocer's. Although she had her needs in mind before entering the store, she lingered for some time, pinching the fruit and putting grapes into her mouth with a quick motion which she believed to be deft and unobserved. She was in no hurry. Moreover, it gave her a slight but indispensable sense of authority to keep the clerk waiting while she pretended to make up her mind.

She moved from shelf to shelf in a high suspense of indecision while the worried little grocer plodded along beside her with folded hands, offering discreet suggestions.

'I know just what you're looking for, Mrs. Folger—something tasty, but easy to prepare. Have you ever tried our canned lobster Newburg? It's really quite exceptional.'

'Oh, dear.' Myra disposed of this recommendation with a regretful headshake. 'My husband just doesn't care for sea food of any kind. In fact, he's suspicious of anything that doesn't look like beefsteak.'

As they exchanged brief conspiratorial smiles, neither needed to say anything more. It might have seemed improbable that such a store would have prospered in this neighborhood, among working people who wanted their meat and vegetables, and no nonsense. But evidently there were enough like Mrs. Folger to make it a profitable business. Here, in this dreary little place, among the shelves of anchovies and caviar and spiced fruits and cans of whole roast Long Island duck, Myra Folger felt the pleasure of exercising the superior discrimination for which she ordinarily found so little outlet.

She pointed to a shelf beyond her reach. 'I think I'll just take a can of those little Vienna sausages. There's no sense in standing over a stove in this kind of weather.'

'How right you are, Mrs. Folger.'

After leaving the store, Mrs. Folger stood for a moment under the awning before stepping out into the sunlight. It was then, as she was waiting for a car to pass, that she saw it all.

As soon as she was back in her own apartment, Myra looked out from behind the curtains, but the man was not in sight. After a while she lay down on the sofa with a damp rag on her forehead. Although she did not get up for some time, this inactivity was plainly not a manifestation of repose, for it was punctuated by nervous, eruptive motions. She kept rolling her head from side to side, and her thin fingers clasped each other repeatedly with a grip that wrenched her knuckles white.

In presenting to this woman the office of spectator, fate had not been generous to Mrs. Pettigrew. What Myra had viewed was perhaps shameless enough, but already her starved imagination was extending and deepening its imprint. She was certain, for example, that she had seen the English girl raise her eyebrow beseechingly and draw back her head in a beckoning gesture. It was the most disgusting thing she had ever witnessed.

After a short time, the rag had become so soggyly oppressive that she lifted it from her head and sat up, meeting herself in the mirror as she did so. Examining her features, Myra was not altogether able to quell the suspicion that her indignation might be reinforced by something else. Was it envy?

Admittedly Mrs. Folger was no beauty. Her thick brown hair, which had always been her pride, was, at thirty-eight, already turning gray. She did have dark, expressive eyes. Years ago, Mr. Folger, in a burst of plagiarized poetry, had told her that they smoldered with a slow fire. It was a height of eloquence he had never again equalled, partly because he drank less these days, partly because the incentive was not there. Un-



fortunately, her eyes only made her appear more gaunt than she was. Even when she was rested after a nap, she looked as though the mildest exertion would leave her looking weary and haggard again.

Myra glanced at the clock and sighed. Her day, which was so full of stagnant hours, seemed to grind to a dead standstill in the hour before five o'clock. For this reason she should probably have been grateful to the English girl for an interesting performance. Many women would have spent a busy evening at the telephone and gone contentedly to bed, since no form of snobbery is satisfied with such a happy sense of achievement as moral righteousness. In Myra's case, the fascination was pathological, perhaps, only in that she had not a single person to confide in.

The arrival of Mr. Folger half an hour later, as she was preparing dinner, was hardly the event to improve her state of mind. He entered by way of the back door with the evening paper under his arm. Drawing back a chair, he seated himself silently at the kitchen table and spread out the sports page. He was a heavy-set man of forty-five, with dry, thinning hair and a ruddy complexion. As he leaned over a picture of Mickey Mantle, his hairy, muscular forearms made damp streaks on the paper. Not until she had begun to set the table did he appear to notice that his wife was even in the room. Then she dropped the silverware with such a clatter that he looked up, startled, but still he said nothing.

Only after she had sat down and they had commenced eating did his glance meet hers in a way that seemed to augur communications. There was always a degree of rigid awkwardness to their conversation, due

in large part to the fact that they disliked each other. However, Mr. Folger, because this state was on the whole a matter of total indifference to him, frequently made a try.

'Damned hot today,' he remarked, as he stabbed his knife determinedly into a puddle of melted butter.

Mrs. Folger acknowledged this banality with a pale smile. After nine years of marriage it seemed completely incredible that she had once persuaded herself to see in his dull comments a kind of rough charm. Occasionally when she was alone, the recollection of some remark of his would send her into abrupt shricks of laughter. It was one of the reasons why she was something of a puzzle to the neighbors. Recently she had found him harder than ever to bear, as she had come to recognize that his coarse, mean little acts were not deliberate. For a long time she had squeezed a measure of gratification from the belief that in struggle she was as powerful as he. But there was no longer any doubt in Myra's mind that, far from actively hating her, he regarded her with nothing more ardent than a mild, chronic antipathy. To everything she said or did he presented such a massive imperviousness that all her cunning devices of retaliation went unnoticed.

'Good potato salad,' he said agreeably. Myra was an excellent cook, and it happened to be one of his favorite dishes. Getting up, he went to the refrigerator and took out a quart of beer.

'How about you?' he inquired, holding up a glass.

She shook her head absently, then changed her mind. 'Yes, I'll have a glass, please.'

Mrs. Folger took the moist glass and pressed it against

her pale cheek. Already having taken one or two half-hearted bites, she had pushed her plate away.

Surprisingly, her husband noticed this. 'Heat getting you down?' he asked.

She arose and carried her glass to the open window. 'The heat, yes, and this—' she made a circular motion with the glass—'this prairie. Does it come to an end somewhere?'

Her husband thought that a strange remark and said so. His literal eye was able to make out, if hers was not, the firm, smoky masonwork of the rug-cleaning establishment not thirty yards from where she was standing.

'The trouble with you women is you spend too much time gabbling among yourselves. You get so you don't make sense.'

Observing her lack of response, he credited himself with a rather clever observation. Mr. Folger took so little interest in his wife that he was really not aware that she had no friends. It had never entered his head that she did not lead exactly the same fussy, chattering existence which he assumed was the chosen lot of every woman.

Passing her hand languidly across her eyes, Myra shut out the squalid view. The private image which took its place occupied her for some minutes, until Mr. Folger, observing this foolishness with growing irritation, laid down his fork sharply.

Opening her eyes, she looked at him reproachfully for puncturing the fragile fabric of her reverie.

'Another headache?' he asked.

'No.'

'Then what the devil's the matter with you?'

A harsh little laugh escaped Myra's lips, and her dark, deep-set eyes challenged him scornfully. 'How could anything possibly be the matter?'

The answer seemed to satisfy Mr. Folger. Lowering his head, he continued chewing his food with noisy complacency.

Mrs. Folger went into the living-room. She was followed after a while by her husband, who removed his shoes and dropped heavily into a chair. Myra did not much care for beer, but she liked its coldness. Furthermore, she was extremely conscious of her lazy nature, and she appreciated any small manual task—even lifting a glass—which gave her an excuse for doing nothing.

Watching her through half-closed eyes, he gave a low laugh.

'I thought you didn't approve of beer.'

Myra flushed. 'Why, I never made any such——'

'Oh yes. Just last week you said it was a drink for sweaty factory hands.'

She shrugged. 'I just said I preferred sherry, and that's a fact.'

He laughed again, and folding his hands across his stomach, emitted a soft belch.

It occurred to Myra that this was the first time in months he had made fun of her gentility. She decided he must be in a good mood. Sipping the beer reflectively, she considered telling him what had happened that afternoon. She knew he would be interested, and she was mildly curious as to what he would have to say. Even at this point, there were fragments of the masculine attitude which still came as a surprise to her. But she knew that in fact she would say nothing about it,

not to him. It was too much like offering him a present for which there would be no exchange.

Rotating the glass idly in her hand, she turned her thoughts once again to that most interesting scene. She wondered if the man had responded to the English girl's invitation. Myra was sorry in a way that she had not stayed to find out. But a decent woman, after all, had to keep her curiosity on a discreet plane. At any rate, she reminded herself, there was really no justification for surprise. Myra was Irish. The prejudices inherited from her father had been substantiated by war-time tales of the floozies from Picadilly. The pity was that so many young men had fallen victim to their cheap devices.

Mrs. Folger, of course, had seen through the English girl at once. Almost the moment she met Mrs. Pettigrew, she had penetrated through that most obvious subterfuge of all—the mask of innocence and affability which many people mistook for charm. Myra felt it was only right that the young man should know what was happening behind his back. Unfortunately, one circumstance in particular complicated her position. It happened that Mrs. Pettigrew was the only person in the world who treated her with cordiality. Occasionally they went shopping together. And sometimes, in her sweet, obvious way, the English girl would consult her on trifling matters of custom. It was flattering to hear the younger woman speak of her as a friend. So few people ever had. Now, however, Myra had the vague notion that somehow she had been used as a front of respectability.

She glanced at her husband, who was by this time

snoring noisily. The bottoms of his damp socks were white with the talcum that he put into his shoes in the morning. The sweetly revolting odor made her wince.

'What a prize,' she murmured.

His head hung forward at a clumsy angle so that his chin was lost beneath the loosened collar. In deference to the heavy meal, he had partially unzipped his trousers. The soft, undisciplined paunch which pushed through looked obscenely white next to his brown hand. Relaxed in this way, he looked old and vulnerable. As she passed behind his chair to pick up the evening paper, the wild vagary flickered into her mind that it would be easy to kill him. Myra's breath stopped. Such aberrations frightened her, for they occurred too often. Only yesterday, as she was watching a small child at play on the front sidewalk, she had been assailed by the vision of a hideous accident beneath the wheels of a truck. It had left her momentarily as upset as if the accident had actually happened.

She lifted the glass of beer with trembling hands. But very quickly her agitation was forgotten.

Upstairs, a door slammed. Myra set the glass down noiselessly on the end table and stood up. Frequently, at about this time, the student, Mr. Oblonski, left his room to go to the library. As often as it was possible for her to do so without appearing too forward, she would casually open her living-room door, which faced the stairs. So eagerly did she look forward to their discussions that the most artless of pretexts overrode her pride. Swiftly crossing the room, she took an old envelope from the pigeon hole above the book shelves, tore off the canceled stamp, and stepped over to the door.

Whoever it was had paused at the landing before continuing his unhurried descent. Myra opened the door.

It was Mr. Oblonski, and he was indeed on his way to the library. At least, he had an armful of books.

'Well, Mr. Oblonski. How are you this evening?' Her tone of jocund surprise was so patently artificial that Myra felt her face grow warm with embarrassment.

The student gave a start, as he always did, as if he were unaccustomed to the sound of his own name.

'Surely you're not going to try to study in this heat.'

He smiled weakly. 'Have to, I'm afraid.'

She scanned his face anxiously, hoping for some sign that he, too, felt that their meetings had by this time acquired, however slightly, the significance of a rendezvous.

'I don't see how you stand it. In this weather it tires me out just to read the evening paper.'

Myra had meant the remark as a compliment to his fortitude, but he only shifted his books uneasily and glanced away.

'Yes, I suppose there are things a person would rather be doing.'

With this, Roy sent a desperate glance toward the door, while Myra stood helpless, temporarily incapable of fending off the awkward silence that was developing between them. What made her part so trying was that even more than herself he lacked the conversationalists' knack of keeping a topic open. Whatever he said put a period to the end of the paragraph. It kept Myra perpetually thrashing about for new material.

A happy idea occurred to her. 'There's a book I've been trying to get. Maybe you could ask for it at the

university library. If it wouldn't be too much trouble, I mean.'

'I'd be glad to,' he said, 'only I'm just going to the public library tonight.' He hesitated. 'Something I can get you there?'

'Why, yes, if you would.' Myra treated this suggestion as if it were an extraordinarily brilliant one. 'The title is *Die Old* or something like that.'

The young man frowned. 'Is it in German?'

'No, no. *Die Old by Saving Your Strength*, or something of the sort. You must have heard of it. Try and think.'

At her command he looked reflective, but the gesture was fruitless. 'I don't believe——'

'It's by a doctor. I was skipping through a few pages at the book store the other day.'

He wrote something in a small notebook. 'Do you happen to know the man's name?'

'No, I really don't. Kesterson or Kettleeson——' Falling on her ear, the names sounded unfamiliar and improbable. 'Since you're going to the public library, would you care if I came along?'

'Not at all.'

Myra went back for her purse, pausing on the way before the mirror. As she touched her hair, she smiled. Now she would have a chance to tell him all about what she had seen that afternoon. It was just the sort of intimate little story their friendship needed.

#### 4

The last witness that afternoon was to have an influence on Mrs. Pettigrew's life, but only indirectly.



The young man, whose name was David Weeks, happened to occupy a room in the building directly across the street from the Pettigrew's apartment. During most of the afternoon he had been sitting by the window examining his stamp collection. In the fall he would begin his second year at the university. Although he did not plan to attend summer session, it was his intention to remain in the city rather than return to 'that weary hamlet' where he had spent his first seventeen years. This decision put a strain on his slim finances, which he was reluctant to bolster by manual labor. At any rate, it was a step he would take only after all other courses had been diligently explored. Consequently, he had been sorting and classifying his stamp collection, not with any possessive pleasure, but with a view to calculating its value on the market.

Another worth-while reason for getting it off his hands was that relatives had taken to sending him stamps for Christmas instead of something more useful. Unless he put a stop to that, it would probably go on for years, since they never conceived of a person as changing when they only thought of him once a year. The dreary work made him sleepy. Frequently he paused to pour himself a glass of lemonade or feed a cheese wafer to the neighborhood cat. It was a stupid hobby anyway—becoming enthusiastic over a bit of paper because it happened to have a certain watermark, or to be perforated at ten and a half instead of eleven. Bookkeeping was what it was. David was ashamed to recall that only two years ago, at sixteen, he could have been so ardent. At any rate, it showed how far he had developed in that time.

Closing the stamp album, he began to stroke the cat. The animal didn't really care for cheese wafers, and looked disappointed each time the morsel turned out the same. It left them damp and crooked at the foot of the chair, lifting its head, time after time, with revived hope. As a reward for this show of trust, David got up to pour the cat some milk. However, when he opened the refrigerator, he found only a chunk of baloney and a half-dozen sausages. The baloney he divided with the cat. Then he returned to his chair beside the window. David was not happy. His resources had sunk to a lower point than he had realized. This was not altogether the result of his own miscalculations. The fact was that when he had taken this room two months ago, he had not figured on his Uncle Hubert moving in with him.

He hadn't seen his uncle in years. One night the old fellow had appeared at the door looking more bedraggled than jaunty, with a battered satchel in his hand. He was, he said, just passing through town on business. But that had been two weeks ago.

David knew he could only blame himself for an over-enthusiastic gesture of hospitality. He had envisioned his uncle's stay as being something of a lark. There had always been a mystery surrounding his mother's brother. It had to do with his source of income. David had never been able to find out more than this, because mention of his name was forbidden at home. Unfortunately, nothing in Hubert's remarks had done much to clear up the matter. It was a curious business, whatever it was. One time he would mention having just come from the Los Angeles office; ten minutes later it

was Boston. David was willing to disregard such minor geographical details, since they didn't seem to bother Uncle Hubert. There was one other habit of his, however, which was forcing David to some grim conclusions regarding the old boy's honesty.

Hardly a day had passed that he did not borrow money from his nephew, and he seemed to suffer a convenient lapse of memory when it came to paying it back. David's savings had been melting away ahead of schedule, even before the arrival of Uncle Hubert. By good fortune, his birthday had come in the second week of May, and his mother had sent fifty dollars. But at present his wallet contained a lone dollar bill. Something had to be done. It might be days before he could get an estimate on the stamp collection. Reluctantly, David took out a sheet of stationery and wrote *Dear Mother*.

But even as he wrote, his hand faltered. He didn't dare mention Uncle Hubert in a letter home, and yet he was almost as reluctant to mention the other ways he had dissipated his money. Moreover, he was suspicious of words that came too easily. Once, at military school, he had stayed up until midnight composing an open letter that exposed the wretchedness of military education. He wanted to leave anyhow, and next to inciting revolt, he could think of no more brilliant way of doing it. But in the morning, when he read over his thesis, he found that he, or it, had changed during the night. He had torn up the letter. In the end he was dropped for inaptitude, and nothing but the opportune facility of indifference had saved his expulsion from representing a rout.

The heat made concentration laborious, but after some minutes he wrote:

I can't tell you how grateful I was to get your present. Money is so much more thoughtful than an ordinary gift, and I must compliment your good taste. My room-mate at the dorm was happy too, since part of it went to him in settlement of an unwise bet. (Did you know that Tashkent is larger than Leeds?) With the rest I treated myself to something that has long been overdue—a really good time. I thought you'd be pleased to hear this. Will give you the details later.

For the present I'm forced to bring up a small difficulty. Do you suppose you could spare . . .

As he was trying to settle on a moderate but adequate figure, David's gaze traveled idly to the open window and beyond, toward the aging brick apartment house across the street. At this point he dropped his pen. In his excitement he did not even notice that it left a dark stain on his trousers, but even if he had known, he would not have cared.

Too soon it was all over. David had missed nothing—the slender, nearly naked body, the smile, at once seductive and ironical. Miraculously, his loquacity had vanished in an instant. Leaning out the window, he observed that the foolish oaf simply stood there, as if his shoes had merged with the hot concrete. David quickly lost patience with the man. He withdrew his head and sat down again. The letter was, by this time, completely forgotten.

David was stunned. Not morally (he had passed that stage long ago). What astonished him was that he had

so radically misjudged the little English girl. He knew her only by sight, having noticed her a few times in the neighborhood stores. The thing that had impressed him most about her was a quality of wistful innocence which characterized the shy way she addressed the clerks. It seemed impossible that he could have been so blind. Reviewing the few brief times he had encountered her, he wondered if something had not escaped him then which he might retrieve now and put in its significant place. Hadn't he noticed something in her expression that betrayed a hint of the sensuality which smoldered so close beneath the surface?

David looked long and thoughtfully at the empty window. It would be self-complimentary to think so, but recently he had become wary of such retrospective wisdom. He had always thought the painting over the mantelpiece at home hopelessly commonplace, until he had read, not long ago, that the artist who painted it was mad. It occurred to David that perhaps this was a matter in which he might welcome the counsel of his uncle. He glanced at his watch. And incidentally, he wondered, where was Uncle Hubert now?

As he turned in under the canopy of the Saxton Hotel, Hubert Willoughby smiled at the doorman, pleasantly, with no more than a trace of condescension. Entering the door, he sauntered across the lobby toward a row of lounge chairs. Although he carried his head erect to the point of hauteur, seemingly unaware of the scene about him, nothing really escaped the shrewd eyes of Mr. Willoughby. Halfway across the lobby, his path took a sudden turn. Like a river-barge pilot guiding his boat with easy confidence along a familiar

channel, he headed directly toward a full-length mirror hung on the opposite wall.

For some reason, perhaps not entirely to be explained by vanity, his self-esteem rarely failed to advance whenever he caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror. At fifty-seven he possessed a figure without a discernible bulge. To advocates of strenuous exercise, it would doubtless have been disheartening to learn that Mr. Willoughby had never lifted a weight in his life, or donned a swimming suit, except for the purpose of acquiring a tan. He had the sort of high, narrow shoulders that defy all but the most skilful efforts at padding, and Mr. Willoughby hadn't had the price of a tailored suit in a number of years. In spite of this, he only just missed putting over the impression that his ill-cut summer sport jacket was a garment borrowed in an emergency, which very soon would be replaced.

Settling himself casually, though not quite by accident, beside a stout, expensively gowned woman of middle age, he crossed his long legs and sighed. Much calculation and rehearsal had gone into Mr. Willoughby's sigh. It was not an auditory effect alone, but involved a gesture of lips, mustache, and eyebrows—indicative hardly more of boredom than of reflective melancholy, a hint that if one's experiences had not met his expectations, it was not so much one's own fault as the way of the world. At the same time, by drawing attention to his own presence, Mr. Willoughby's sigh was a reminder that life, being merely a series of adventures, could easily be altered by a chance encounter. It was a device, Mr. Willoughby's sigh was,

and he would not have argued otherwise—like the shopkeeper's grin and the salesman's handshake. There were tools in every trade.

The woman turned her head. And Mr. Willoughby, pretending to be startled by the sound that had escaped his lips, turned to meet her. Although he did not actually smile, something in his expression communicated the notion that, were he not a gentleman, he would have smiled. The woman responded in a manner to which, of late, he had grown more and more accustomed. She got up and walked away.

However, she had left behind her on the chair a copy of the *Evening Tribune*. Sliding his chair a few inches to the right, Hubert yawned, stretched, and negligently dropped his hand over the paper. By habit, he turned first to the society section, making a note, in the event a use for such information should arise, that the Ashton DeBracys had sailed for Europe. Next he examined the racing news, and finally the financial page. Although he had never in his life invested his own money in either common or preferred stocks, he had frequently persuaded others to do so. The interesting part of this was that the stocks Mr. Willoughby importuned people to buy were never the ones listed on the financial page. After perhaps fifteen minutes, he folded the paper and arose.

This time he did not use the main entrance. It was poor strategy to be frequently seen entering and leaving a hotel in the same hour. Emerging into the scorching heat of 14th Street, he gave the second doorman the same smile he had bestowed on the first. Hubert Willoughby was opposed no less to the Old World custom

of treating inferiors with frigid disdain than to that of certain Americans who appeared to regard them as equals. Immediately he took off the sport jacket and hooked it over his thumb. Leaving the vicinity of what he liked to call his *uptown* residence, he began the twelve blocks' walk back to his nephew's room on Trenton Street.

On the way, he tarried before the window of his customary liquor store. Displayed there in a bucket of artificial ice was a bottle of really quite decent champagne. It was strange, seeing it exhibited in the window. The younger generation had no taste for such things. If the proof were high, that was all they asked. He entered the door and approached the counter. Before he had quite got a chance to speak, however, the clerk, a young man of less than thirty, set out on the counter a bottle of seventy-nine cent port.

Mr. Willoughby froze. He was mortified that after so few visits the man had him typed as a purchaser of the cheapest wine in the store. Turning his back, he pretended to survey the rows of bottles. For one reckless moment he considered asking for the champagne in the window. The bottle would cost nearly every cent of his hoard, but it would almost be worth it to put the fellow in his place. However, as it usually did these days, prudence won out. He laid a dollar on the counter while the clerk wrapped the bottle.

'That champagne in the window,' he said casually, 'do you happen to have a case of it?'

The young man gave him an odd glance and nodded.

'Just for a little party.' Mr. Willoughby tried to smile, but it didn't quite hide his discomfiture. 'Not



tonight. Next week—just a little party for some friends . . .’

The man laid down his change. He picked up the coins and hurried out.

When he entered the apartment on Trenton Street, his nephew was in the kitchenette frying sausages.

‘Hi, Uncle Hubert. How’s business?’

Mr. Willoughby gave a frosty nod. He was not in the least aware of the question’s facetiousness, for it was the way David greeted him every day. But he was still smarting from the humiliating incident in the liquor store, and he was in no chatty mood. Rinsing out a glass, he poured it full of wine. He sat down and turned on the radio in hopes of finding a familiar old tune. Hubert was not as a rule addicted to sentimental reminiscence, but there were times in the evening, with a glass of wine . . . As the sweetish port assailed his educated taste-buds, he made a wry face and set the glass down.

If Hubert Willoughby lacked such time-honored virtues as honesty, unselfishness, and sincerity, he was nevertheless in one respect a true old-fashioned gentleman. He detested cruelty of any kind. For this reason, he considered a display of bad manners more than a social error. It showed a want of imagination as well as a lack of feeling. When a person was rude, someone else suffered. He dwelt with some bitterness on the callous way he had been treated in the liquor store. That the young man’s offense had probably not been intentional was, in Mr. Willoughby’s eyes, small excuse.

David sat down at the table with a plate of sausages and a box of crackers. It was a far from satisfactory

meal. While he ate, he sent frequent vindictive glances toward Uncle Hubert and his bottle, the price of which would have provided him with a small steak.

But Hubert, who was gloomy in his own right, drank on undisturbed.

At the beginning David had not minded having him around. For there was a certain purity to Uncle Hubert. He was a fraud, of course, but so open and wholehearted was his phoniness that it added up to a kind of specious integrity, as if he felt himself committed to a role which must be carried through at all costs. David had been delighted to find a human specimen whose reactive motions were so predictable that they made him less a study in psychology than in physiology and simple mechanics. Whenever they went out to dinner, it was fascinating to watch him appraise a woman taking a seat at the next table. David had quickly learned to forecast the precise flexion of his arm, the angle of his head which preceded aggression or withdrawal. Actually, Uncle Hubert's aggressions—at any rate in his nephew's presence—had been confined to prolonged, melancholy expressions of rapture which usually left David too embarrassed to enjoy his meal.

Yes, there was a fidelity about the man one almost had to admire—from the detached perspective of a distant table or the adjoining bench in a public park. But the cosmopolitan air was not intended for the mean dimensions of David's one-room apartment. This fact had a dispiriting effect on both of them. After borrowing from his nephew the price of a bottle, Hubert would sit for hours in David's one comfortable chair, sipping the

wine with a disdainful grimace and staring bleakly at the monotonous view. In one thought, at least, the two of them were in accord. They would both be happier when he left.

David bit into a stale cracker and followed it with warm lemonade. The pulpy, acidic mass which stuck momentarily in his throat, served to resolve his hesitancy.

'Uncle Hubert,' he announced, 'I hate to be the one to bring this up, but you've been here two weeks now.'

'And I'll be sorry to be leaving you.'

This response evoked no perceptible surprise, because David had heard similar remarks before. However, he continued to be hopeful.

'You're going away?'

'Oh yes.'

'When?'

Mr. Willoughby crossed his legs and looked out the window. 'Very soon. Very soon.'

This reply left the youth vaguely dissatisfied. But he was deflected from further pursuit of the subject by his uncle's rapt expression.

'Is something happening over there?' David inquired.

'Where?'

'Across the street.'

'Not that I know of,' replied Hubert indifferently.

'Well, there was something pretty strange going on this afternoon.'

'Strange?' repeated Uncle Hubert without much interest.

'I'd say so. I'll bet the lady's husband would too. They've got the apartment directly across the way. Anyhow, this afternoon I was looking out the window,

and just then she stepped up to *her* window without any clothes on, and smiled at a man down in the street.'

Uncle Hubert perked up visibly. 'No clothes, you say?'

'Well, the next thing to it.'

'You're sure she smiled?'

'And what a smile,' said David, encouraged by the other's curiosity.

'You don't say.' The older man looked thoughtfully toward the window. 'What did this fellow do?'

'Nothing—the boob.'

'Hmm.' Mr. Willoughby seemed to be pondering something. He stroked his chin with deliberation.

'She's married too, eh?'

'Yes. Their name's Pettigrew. She's English. I don't think she's been over here long.'

The skimpy meal had left David's hunger unappeased. He was debating whether to fry the last remaining sausage or save it for breakfast, when it occurred to him that his uncle had not yet eaten. He glanced up to find that Hubert had swung his chair around so that it squarely faced the window. David watched him for some time without speaking. From the way the older man was studying the building across the street, one might have supposed he had acquired a sudden interest in architecture.

With a shrug, David went over to the refrigerator and took out the sausage.

## 5

The student, Roy Oblonski, returned to the apartment on Trenton Street somewhat later than usual that

night. He closed the door behind him and noiselessly worked the catch into place. With a glance at Mrs. Folger's door, he set his foot cautiously on the bottom step. Having ditched her at the library on the pretense of meeting a friend, he had no desire to be accosted again.

He was sure by now that she must stand inside waiting for him, so frequently did they encounter each other. Roy always felt his heart sink as her door opened and she appeared before him with that feigned expression of surprise. What made it particularly painful was that although she was too homely for her attentiveness to confer flattery, he nevertheless found himself ill at ease in her company. Logically, she should have been easy to brush off, since he didn't care what she thought of him one way or another. But she always met him with a volley of saved-up opinions which he was quite unequipped to defy. Holding onto the bannister, he proceeded upward without haste, minimizing the protests of the ancient boards by avoiding every other step.

When he reached his room, Roy felt his way clumsily across its dark interior until he bumped into the desk. Switching on the goose-neck lamp, he drew back the chair and sat down. The metal lamp shade threw out a yellow arc which bisected the littered desk and dropped to the floor, exposing a patch of worn linoleum. Although the sun had set hours ago, the room seemed more stifling now than when he had left it. Roy lit a cigarette. He stared with distaste at the textbook which lay before him. Between its covers was arranged all the knowledge he had supposedly committed to memory representing, fact by fact, chapter by

chapter, days and weeks of his life. Gazing at it now, he could not summon to mind a single detail, and though he was to have a crucial examination in the morning, he contemplated this fact with indifference.

Customarily, his routine was fenced by a self-imposed schedule from which deviations were rare. In fact, he followed the rigid, almost self-chastising existence of a reformed libertine who fears his own excesses, although the analogy collapsed when applied to any other aspect of Roy's life. What he feared was not his own excesses, but total, overwhelming extinction in a world in which he felt himself suited for practically nothing. It was a stern regimen he kept himself to, punctuated by an occasional glass of beer or a movie. But these defections, unless they occurred more than once a week, were actually part of the plan and not transgressions in any real sense. On a Wednesday night though, it was unusual for him to return so late.

The fact was that Mrs. Folger's news had shocked him a great deal more than he would have liked anyone to know.

He laid his cigarette in the ash tray and tilted the chair back. A thin line of smoke stood vertically in the still air, like a taut cord connecting the desk to the sharp perimeter of darkness above. Roy Oblonski was twenty-eight. He had never been married, but the physical difficulties involved in this were in no sense unconquerable. Until recently he had never permitted himself to give women much of his concentration, since his energies were absorbed by what was to him a much more fundamental matter—that of getting his degree in English and ultimately, he hoped, a Ph.D. Neverthe-

less, his reluctance to marry was more economic than philosophic. There was nothing fanatical about his inclination to celibacy; rather it reflected his cautious nature. It was the same cautiousness which might perhaps encourage a man to early marriage, but not on the ninety dollars a month allotted to him by the Veterans Administration. Even at that he was not altogether ignored. There were two or three undersexed women in the English Department who saw in his bland manner the harmlessness that they esteemed most in a man. But he had given them no encouragement, and their pale, flirtatious overtures had soon ceased.

In a sense, Roy was even a misfit academically. At first, when he had decided to major in English, he had earnestly believed it would provide him with an absorbing life's work. Some of it he did enjoy, but he did not really care for poetry. The ethereal flights and sensuous images of the great English poets, in fact, bored him. This might have seemed unfathomable to some, inasmuch as he spent the greater part of his waking hours either reading poetry or reading criticism of poetry. It did not strike Roy as particularly odd. Does the stenographer love her typewriter or the coal man his shovel? As it worked out, there was a degree of sensible efficiency in this attitude. He could spot faulty tetrameter in a verse as fast as the next person, and as for criticism, there were any number of authorities to draw on. Whenever he was in a mood to chuck it, he was assailed by a petrifying, anachronistic picture of himself sitting on a high stool, marking figures in a ledger with a quill pen. This was what drove him on.

During the last month, however, a change had come over Roy's life. This was not outwardly noticeable. The ascetic structure of his daily routine remained unaltered, but it had become more and more irksome to him. It was his plan to get his degree in English by late summer so that he could go on to graduate school in the fall. Roy knew that he could not get by with no more than a cursory glance at a textbook. His mind required the slow etching process of repetition. And too frequently, as he was trying to memorize a passage from Byron or Pope, he found his attention slipping back to his own century, to two specific geographical points—his own room and the one on the other side of the wall.

It had been about a month since he had begun to take serious notice of Mrs. Pettigrew. He saw her nearly every day. Although her smallness and beauty and simple friendliness had appealed to him from the beginning, at first it had not been difficult to forget her once he was inside his own room. But recently, more than once as he rounded the turn in the stairs, he had caught himself looking swiftly back.

Quite often, late at night, as he was trying to study, his isolation would be painfully emphasized by the marital gaiety of the young couple next door. Then he would stop and light a cigarette, and wait for the printed page, his own reality, to become important again. He had considered a number of times asking the landlord to have the door between the two apartments made soundproof. Something always stopped him. Really, there was nothing for a normal person to object to. The Pettigrews were actually a rather quiet



couple. Who but a crank would complain because his neighbor took a shower very late on a warm summer night?

There was a soft rapping on the door. Roy frowned as he pushed back his chair. He wondered what that could be. So far, Mrs. Folger hadn't taken to following him upstairs, but she was becoming more aggressively friendly every day. This time, he decided, he would put her in her place. But when he opened the door, he was so astonished, he took an involuntary step backward. It was Catherine Pettigrew.

'Good evening, Mr. Oblonski.'

His jaw went slack, and instead of replying, he swallowed twice. She was wearing white shorts and a halter. As she smiled at him, Roy solemnly believed that she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He hesitated, uncertain as to the propriety of inviting her into his room.

'I know you're awfully busy,' she apologized, 'but the window in my bedroom seems to be stuck. Do you suppose you could get it open for me?'

'I'd be glad to try,' Roy answered weakly. He knew he was blushing, and it made him angry at himself.

As he accompanied her down the hall, he held himself a cautious step to the rear.

Catherine led him into the bedroom. 'It's this one,' she pointed out. 'It's already part-way open, you see, but a person needs all the fresh air he can get on a night like this.'

'That's quite true,' Roy agreed brightly. 'Now if I can just pull the bed out a way.'

'Here, let me help.'

As she leaned over the bed, he hastily averted his eyes.

It turned out to be more of a job than he had expected. The window frame was old and warped. By the time he got it open, he was breathing heavily and there was a smudge of dirt on his sleeve.

Mrs. Pettigrew was unhappy about this. 'Now I've made you soil your shirt. I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Oblonski.'

'Oh, that's nothing.' He tried to sound casual, but he felt self-conscious, standing alone there with her in the bedroom.

They started to move toward the living-room.

'I wouldn't have bothered you,' she explained. 'But my husband's out of town, and it's so dreadfully hot.'

'Quite all right,' he muttered, glancing about uneasily, as if he'd lost his bearings. He looked everywhere except at Catherine Pettigrew.

'Please let me launder your shirt for you,' she offered. 'I could have it ready by the time you leave in the morning.'

From Roy's expression, one might have thought she had asked him to remove his trousers on the spot.

'Oh, no. No, no that's all right,' he stammered. 'Shirt was dirty anyhow.'

He found the door and went out quickly.

Back in his room he sat down, and flipping open the book, tried to put her out of his mind. He had planned to spend several hours preparing for the exam and, if all went well, to be in bed by shortly after midnight. Already, though, he was more than an hour behind schedule. The heat was almost unbearable. Tiny insects

infiltrated through the screen by the thousand and swarmed around the light. Bending determinedly over the desk, he tried to make himself read, but he found that he was less interested in the words than in the odd patterns formed by the drops of sweat as they fell from his chin. After a short while, he pushed the book aside.

At the beginning he had not understood where Mrs. Folger was leading him with her slanted references to the English girl. Roy had an habitual dread of being drawn into the circle of another person's life, even temporarily. So wholeheartedly uninterested was he in people that it required laborious effort for him to pretend otherwise. Several times in the past he had actually resorted to rudeness in order to extricate himself from an insinuating trend in her conversation. But this evening, when he had finally become aware of what she was talking about, something had compelled him to get away. He had left her and walked the streets for a long time alone.

To the average person, Roy Oblonski's emotional life would doubtless have seemed singularly bleak. People sensed a rigidity about him, but whether it was due to an elemental lack of feeling or to the tedium of a dull existence, no one ever got close enough to him to know. Roy did not know, himself. Once in a while, especially when he was drinking by himself, his thoughts turned back to childhood, to certain times of inexpressible joy, as when he had first stepped out the door on a Saturday morning in early autumn to find the whole neighborhood slowly coming to life. Sometimes he wondered whether the fire had died for good.

But he had never, even in his earlier years, felt anything quite like the strange passion that had come over him this evening while Mrs. Folger was talking. He had wanted to shout 'Liar,' only there was no mistaking the indignant sincerity of her tone. After he had left her, he had tramped the city for more than an hour; he did not know exactly how long. Eventually he had ended up at a movie. This was one escape that Roy had found dependable ever since his early army days. But the two hours' escape had not quite been worth that first fierce pang which had attacked him the instant the picture ended, when, with painful distinctness, he saw Mrs. Pettigrew standing almost naked before her window, casting a lustful smile at a man in the street below.

He turned his head toward the door that separated the two apartments. Nothing in Roy Oblonski's narrow experience could possibly have yielded an explanation for the way he felt. After returning to civilian life, he had marked off his own boundaries with an iron determination, even with a kind of grim pride. Up to now his discipline had not failed him. This was his last chance. In three years, if he did not falter, he expected to receive his Ph.D. in English. It was his last opportunity to win the secure respectability that many seemed to have been granted at birth, that others had already gained, and that more still—blast their graceless, cheerful souls—evidently did not need.

He began to turn the pages rapidly in hopes of driving this thing from his mind. Then he paused. From the next room came the clear, soprano voice of Mrs. Pettigrew. She was little more than a mediocre

singer, but Roy, who had no ear for music, listened with the enraptured countenance of an opera lover hearing his favorite aria perfectly rendered. Even before the song had ended, however, his expression changed. A hard look came into his eyes. He picked up the book, closed it carefully, and turned it over in his hand with an odd deliberation, as if he were guessing its weight. Suddenly he stood up, raised his arm, and hurled the book with all his strength.

Roy retrieved the volume at once and carried it back to the desk. He felt ashamed. Even though he detested what was between its covers, he had somewhat the same respect for a book that the craftsman has for his implements. The guilt he felt because of the broken binding even caused him for a little while to look more favorably on its contents. But not for long. He was too disturbed to study this evening.

Switching off the lamp, he went up to the window. He lit a cigarette and pushed the match out through a tiny opening in the screen. It was no cooler here. He drew in the smoke to the depths of his lungs, giving himself hungrily to his one self-indulgence. There wasn't much of a view from this window. To the left, the hard outlines of the nearby buildings cut crisply across the sky where it was livened by the distant lights of the downtown business section. But in the other direction, toward the river, the buildings had no identity and were only part of the larger darkness.

An auto moved swiftly down the street, and a shadowy mesh flitted across Roy's face. As the headlights reached into a crevice between two buildings, they picked out a tall man wearing a bill cap. The man

blinked back at the lights with a startled expression, like a deer surprised on a mountain road. Then there was darkness again.

Sitting down at the desk once more, he continued to smoke without turning on the lamp. The wall before him was laced with a tenuous pattern of light that trembled, faded, and reappeared. When he had finished the cigarette, he ground it out on the linoleum. Then he switched on the lamp. After that Roy tried, he really tried, with all his concentration, to come to some amicable terms with Mr. Milton. And then it began again. Mrs. Pettigrew was singing her song.

## **PART THREE**

### *Thursday*





## *Thursday*

### *I*

As soon as he was out of bed, Mr. Folger let up the shade. A yellow square of sunlight framed his wife's face momentarily, before she turned away with a groan and drew the sheet over her head. He did not say anything for several minutes, but after he had gotten into his shoes and trousers, he nudged her arm.

'How about getting breakfast on time this morning, Myra?'

He went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Whenever she could manage it, Mrs. Folger would contrive to stay in bed until after her husband had gone to work. In the summer, however, this was not often. In the wintertime it was still dark when he left. Nothing could rouse her then, not even his sharp, surly comments. She would lie there listening to the mournful wind which sounded so drear and hostile surging through the naked trees. On cold winter mornings, when the fine snow sifted noiselessly against the window pane, she would not even open her eyes, much less stir from the bed. But with the coming of summer she lost the fortitude for this indulgence.

Myra pushed the sheet away from her face. She was always a little surprised by the room's brightness at this hour of the morning. It was not ordinarily a cheerful room. By noon, when the sun's rays had retreated

to the window sill, it became depressingly gloomy. She had never attempted to make the room attractive. The cramped floor space permitted little scope for inventiveness, even if she had cared. What she wanted, felt she was entitled to, was her own room, but she had never been able to persuade her husband to move. By now she had given up. She observed the filthy flannel jacket hung on the closet door. What was the point in trying to fix up the room for herself when at every turn she had to give quarter to disgusting masculine encroachments?

Closing her eyes again, Myra let herself drift into a scene which was by this time as graphically familiar to her as any that actually existed. She was reclining on a chaise longue in a bedroom of such enormous length that when her husband entered the doorway at the opposite end, she had time to finish the paragraph she was reading before he had drawn near enough to speak. When it came to the physical appearance of her spouse, Myra's imagination fell down. Except to note that he was well-dressed and extremely solicitous about her health, she gave him little thought . . . But there was a fine view of the mountains through the french windows, and down in the valley a pure spring lake, which could be reached by the footpath that wound through the blossoming sweet clover.

'Myra!'

Opening her eyes, she raised up sleepily and reached for her robe at the foot of the bed.

Seating herself at the dressing table, she began to take down her hair. While she was doing this, she reviewed her conversation of the previous evening with Mr. Oblonski. On the way to the library he had listened

without comment to her account of the English girl's shocking actions. Perhaps this morning, now that he'd had time to ponder it, he would have something interesting to say. So far, she had to admit, he had proved to be almost as uncommunicative as her husband. But, of course, his was the reticence of a shy man rather than the boorish insensibility of a dull one.

The bathroom door opened and Mr. Folger's lathered face appeared. When he saw that she was up, he closed it again.

A few minutes later she arose and went into the kitchen.

Not the least of Mr. Folger's vices, in Myra's eyes, was his addiction to that old-fashioned custom, the hearty breakfast. It was all the more odious because she herself was unable to get down a bite. Once she was up she seldom felt inclined to return immediately to bed, so she usually sat there drinking black coffee and watching him complacently sop up his egg with the third or fourth slice of toast. His good appetite, in fact any unrestricted show of high spirits, had a reproaching effect on Myra's listlessness. There had been a time, a very short time, when she had imagined herself to be strengthened by his buoyant energy, a propitious exchange in which she fancied he absorbed a little of her sensitiveness. It pained her now to recollect that she was nearly thirty when she had believed this nonsense.

After she had made coffee, she got out the frying pan. At this point a small catastrophe occurred. There were only two eggs in the house. As she dropped them into the pan, she broke the yolks of both of them.

Mr. Folger, his face still pink from shaving, came up

behind her. He was drying himself with a bath towel.

'I should think,' he remarked between short, angry stabs at his cheek, 'that with your great educated mind you could learn to crack an egg shell without smashing the whole egg.'

Myra brushed him with a brief, scorching glance. Then she calmly picked up the pan and dumped its contents into the sink. A puff of steam arose as her husband's abortive breakfast met the moist porcelain.

Mr. Folger watched this operation with mute wrath. He let the towel slip from his shoulders and drop into a soggy heap at his feet.

'One of these days when you pull a trick like that,' he said evenly, 'you're going to end up with a bloody nose.'

With this he turned and walked out of the room.

When he came back again, he was fully dressed. Pouring himself a cup of coffee, he stood beside the refrigerator and sipped it slowly, while his wife stacked away the dishes that had drained overnight. His eyes followed her movements churlishly. Once he seemed on the point of saying something, but instead he raised the cup silently to his lips.

Mr. Folger was not a reflective man. His complaints were few and they were rarely directed against anything which did not concern bodily comfort. He was quite settled to his routine, lusterless life, because it had never seriously entered his mind that there was any other kind. Still, there were times, as on mornings like this, when he looked at the woman he had married and wondered: Where in the hell is the payoff? He provided for her, gave her money to keep the pantry

stocked. She had as many clothes as any man's wife on the same salary. All in all, she led a pretty rosy life, to his way of thinking.

And what did he get out of it—not even breakfast. He lingered on this resentfully, and with good reason, because it was one of the few things about which he was finicky. There was something cheerful about a plate of bacon and eggs in the morning. It started him off in a good mood. And now his morning was ruined. Peevishly he eyed his wife, who went about her tasks as if he were not in the room. He noticed she had on lipstick and that her cheeks were rouged, which was extraordinary this early in the morning. He always found her particularly repulsive when she tried to make herself attractive. With her looks and figure it struck him as indecent, somehow. He could have stood that, though, but you couldn't expect a man to go without his breakfast.

On his way out the door, however, Mr. Folger came to a decision which he found faintly consoling. She could eat dinner in her own company tonight, he resolved. He wouldn't be there.

As soon as he was gone, Myra left off what she was doing and went into the living-room. She had only kept at it to conceal her nervousness. One thing she was determined not to do was to let herself go in his presence. Strangely, though, now that he had gone, she felt her agitation subsiding. What she had wanted to do was to throw herself, weeping, onto the sofa, as she had done so many times before. Instead, as she sat down, Myra felt that she was contemplating the situation with an almost impersonal detachment.

Mr. and Mrs. Folger had had many bitter words in the past. But this was the first time in their married life that he had ever threatened her with physical violence. This time the cold nakedness of his words had choked off any reply. It was several minutes before Myra realized that what she had taken for calmness was only the dumb acceptance of total defeat. From now on, no matter how clever she was, no matter how much of a fool she tried to make of him, she would always stand the risk of coming up against that final guardian of his dignity—simple, brute force. It was not, actually, that she feared he would strike her. She really did not believe he could make himself feel passionately enough toward her for that. But the threat was there, and that was sufficient.

Of course she could leave him, but what then? She did not have the stamina any more for a full-time job. She needed her naps—an hour in the morning, an hour and a half in the afternoon. Without these periods of reinvigoration, she slipped under the shadow of an overpowering weariness. For Myra, life had too fragile an appeal to risk such spells of fatigue, which did not bring her easement from anguish, but instead the vague fear that one day her energy might sink past the point from which it could be readily restored. There were times when even these naps were not enough. Some days she would stay in bed until evening, rousing herself then only to forestall her husband's vicious remarks.

Myra's eye happened to fall on the painting above the radio, a scene of a lone Indian standing on a rock. It was a favorite of Mr. Folger's. For an instant she seemed to be looking at the thing with ironical amusc-

ment, as though she had just taken unexpected courage from the realization that her lot could fall no lower. But suddenly she turned away, and sinking her head into a pillow, she began to cry.

It was this that nearly caused her to miss Roy Oblonski. Too late she heard him coming down the stairs. There wasn't time to fix her face, but she decided to go meet him anyway. Just now she needed his company more than ever. She opened the door as he reached the bottom of the steps.

For an awkward moment they stood facing each other.

Myra forced a smile. 'Good morning, Mr. Oblonski.'

The young man appeared to have spent a sleepless night. His face was drawn, and he stared at her through bloodshot eyes. But it was his expression which caused Myra to blanch.

What she read in his face was a look of distaste verging on repugnance. There was no mistaking it. He had visibly recoiled the instant she opened the door. Impulsively, like a child, Myra wiped her tear-stained cheek on the sleeve of her dress. Although he had the courtesy to avert his gaze, the damage was already done. She did not try to detain him longer. Stepping back, she closed the door and rushed to the bedroom mirror.

At the first glimpse of her puffed, ugly features, Myra wondered how she could have been such a fool. In one stroke she had undone all her earlier efforts toward putting him at ease. Whatever hopeful gesture she made after this would be smothered by the image of a cranky, weeping, middle-aged woman. In despair, she sank onto the bed and covered her face.

She hated them all, Roy Oblonski too. All her life people had avoided her because she was not attractive. In her second year at college she had tried out for the lead in *Romeo and Juliet*. There was no real question but that she was the best actress of the half-dozen who auditioned for the part. The director had said as much. He had drawn her aside and tactfully told her that, while her acting was superb, she was just not quite the type. What he had meant was that it was presumptuous of her to believe that lines recited by Myra Moss communicated the same passion as if they had been uttered by a stupid little thing with perfect measurements and delicate features. The part was ultimately given to a Freshman girl whose pert, pretty face more than compensated for her lack of feeling. Myra had never hated anyone the way she hated that girl, the more so because the object of her antipathy treated her, as she did everyone, with open affection. At the end of the semester, Myra had withdrawn from school.

She reached over and picked up a comb. She began to run it slowly through her hair. Yes, the beautiful could afford to be humble, the strong to be gentle. People like Myra were expected to keep their place. The comb caught on a snag in her hair, and she jerked it roughly through. Just keep their place.

She glanced out the window. Next door somebody had already put out the wash. It hung motionless and dripping in the morning sunlight. Suddenly the screen door opened, and Mrs. Pettigrew appeared, wearing a towel over her head. Myra's comb stopped, then began to move again, more slowly. As she took in the younger woman's profile, a curious thing



occurred to her. It was odd that she had never noticed before how much the little English girl resembled the one who had stolen the part from her in the school play. Mrs. Pettigrew turned her head and Myra drew back. Very quietly she drew the shade.

## 2

Catherine Pettigrew sat on the back steps drying her hair in the sun. At eight o'clock the thermometer stood in the middle seventies. In another hour the heat would begin to grow oppressive, but at this time of the morning, it was actually rather pleasant. She could not fathom this climate at all. The hot, breathless night had kept her tossing until nearly dawn, until she had fallen to sleep at last out of sheer fatigue. And now, sitting in the sunlight, she felt almost chilly. Below the short sleeves of her summer dress her bare arms shivered slightly and she cradled them in her lap. Closing her eyes, Mrs. Pettigrew lifted her face contentedly to the sun. Before long the heat would make her sullen and querulous again, but right now it was very good to be alive.

The screen door slammed behind her. Mrs. Folger appeared, carrying a basket of trash. Without a word she stepped across the English girl's outstretched legs and walked over to the incinerator, a rusty oil drum. Dumping out the contents of the basket, she lit a match to the refuse and stood there for a minute watching it burn. Bits of black ash fluttered above the drum, borne upward by the heated air, and then settled back slowly as the fire died down.

Mrs. Pettigrew was puzzled by the other's aloof behavior. Although the two women were hardly on terms of intimacy, they always greeted one another in a cordial way. At first she'd had the feeling that the older woman did not quite approve of her for some reason. But Catherine, who had never had an enemy in her life, charitably attributed Mrs. Folger's manner to her native reserve.

When Myra came back to the house carrying the empty basket, Catherine turned to speak, but Mrs. Folger's pinched features retained their severity. Clinging to the opposite railing, she passed up the steps and into the house without once lowering her gaze.

Alone again, Catherine was gravely reflective. Casting back over their previous encounter, she tried to recall any way she might have given offense. She had never in her life purposely hurt anyone, and it sincerely pained her to think that, unintentionally, she might have made a cruel remark. However, she was of too naturally cheerful a disposition to be cast down for long by trifles. When her hair was nearly dry, she stretched, arose reluctantly, and went inside.

Ten minutes later she emerged from her apartment and locked the door behind her. This time she went out by way of the front door.

Not far from the apartment house on Trenton Street was a small triangular park. It was less than a hundred yards by its longest dimension, hardly more than a wedge of scraggly vegetation between two converging avenues. When she had nothing else to do, Mrs. Pettigrew liked to sit here under the sprawling trees which shaded the benches along the walk. The foliage looked

scrubby and unkempt because there was no pressure by the residents of this part of town to have it kept up. But it broke the gray uniformity of the area, and was for this reason more welcome to the eye than the larger better manicured parks uptown.

Catherine had not gone more than a block when she became aware that someone had fallen in beside her. Turning her head, she recognized the young man who lived across the street. Although she had seen him about occasionally, they had never spoken. Consequently, she was somewhat startled by his aggressively friendly smile.

‘Mind if I walk along?’

Catherine slowed her step. Although she had settled herself by now to brash American men, this one seemed more forward than was warranted on the flimsy grounds of neighborliness. However, he was hardly more than a boy, and anyway his friendliness appeared genuine enough. It was difficult to be frosty in reply to someone so amiable.

‘I’m really not going anywhere.’

‘That’s all right,’ said David agreeably. ‘Neither am I.’

They walked the next block in silence. When David had seen her leaving the building, he had hurried down without any real plan in mind. Now that he had taken the plunge, though, he found himself recoiling at his own boldness. With each step, his agony became more acute. His glance slipped nervously in her direction.

‘It’ll be getting hot again pretty soon.’

Catherine nodded briefly.

David was glumly certain it was the most fatuous remark ever uttered. What did a woman of this kind expect a man to say? He ransacked his memory in hopes of finding some assistance from the novels he had read recently. But he discovered that what he should have followed most heedfully, the opening phase, was precisely what he had skipped.

During the past year, his mother's letters had been sprinkled with well-intentioned homilies cautioning him against the temptations of the big city. This counsel had had the contrary effect such advice usually has. Very often, at about the time a woman begins to have fears that her absent son is becoming too intimate with worldly corruption, he is wondering whether there is something wrong with him that he is not. Neither ever quite appreciates the other's anxiety. David stealthily took in Mrs. Pettigrew's expressionless profile. But what good was a readiness for corruption if you didn't know the opening move?

When they reached the park, Catherine stopped. She turned to her uninvited companion.

'Thank you for accompanying me,' she said curtly. 'This is as far as I'm going.'

David suspected he had noted a hint of coolness in her remark. But, of course, convention demanded that. The lady must be chilly until the final thaw.

'I'm really not headed for anywhere myself,' he replied cheerfully. 'Shall we just sit down?'

Catherine surveyed him for a moment with amused incredulity. Although she was not in the least annoyed by his impudence, she was also not even slightly interested in his company.

'You do just as you wish,' she advised as she turned away. 'I'm going to go look at the flowers.'

'That is a good idea.'

Situated in the center of the park was a large circular flower garden. Its neglect was evident in the vigorous, jungle-like diversity of the foliage. Mrs. Pettigrew found in this variety a challenge. She even carried a small botanical handbook in her purse as an aid to identification. It was not that she was much given to the unrewarding hobby of improving her mind, but the work of keeping up a tiny apartment left her with a great deal of free time.

As they strolled toward the garden, David became more hopeful. Although he knew nothing about flowers, he was alert to their one asset. You could admire them without talking about them.

Bending down, Catherine scrutinized the petals of a pink chrysanthemum. She began to turn the pages of the book.

David had the discouraging notion that he had been forgotten.

Mrs. Pettigrew studied the blossom with scholarly absorption while David continued to look on morosely from the side. This wasn't going the way he had expected at all. Last night, as he lay in bed, he had pictured her pressing him with intimate questions about his personal life, in the way women did. This, of course, would be after they had dressed and were drinking tea from those dainty cups the English used. With an elusive smile, he would hold her off where woman belongs, at the fringe of man's inscrutable pre-occupation. Presently he would take her in his arms,

growing momentarily philosophical in a mysterious way. An abstract remark, ironically bent, would give her something to puzzle over in the coming year. Then he would simply kiss her and close the door, separating their worlds forever.

But as she moved from flower to flower, David had the frustrating notion that he stood at the fringe of *her* inscrutability, rather than the other way around. Gloomily he kicked a stone and watched it go skittering into the grass.

Then unexpectedly his luck changed. She turned to ask if he knew the name of a small fern-like shrub which bordered that section of the garden.

'I can't seem to find it in the book,' she complained.

David was an indifferent lover of nature. If he were truthful, the best commendation he could have produced would have been that pollen didn't bother his nose. Bending over the plant, he felt it, smelled it, and pursed his lips.

'I don't suppose it could be from China,' he speculated.

'If it is, it's not listed that way.'

'Frankly,' he confided, 'it's a stranger to me too. May I see your book?'

Catherine handed it over, and David looked about for a place to sit down. The cement bench behind them was still damp with dew, but he found a newspaper which he spread out beneath them.

She was correct. Nothing like it appeared in the book. 'Probably some sort of mutation,' he suggested. 'Are you familiar with Mendel?'

'No.'

'Well, he showed that even in familiar plants sometimes you'll find a freak.'

'What did that prove?' asked Mrs. Pettigrew.

It was a reasonable question, but having used up his knowledge of the subject, he was not inclined to pursue it further.

'Lately I've gotten interested in nature myself,' he confessed. And then added hastily, 'On an entirely different level, though. The philosophy more than the details.'

He noticed that her attention had deserted him as she appeared to be watching something across the park. David wondered whether this was quite the right tack. Women were notoriously indifferent to abstractions, and it had always been in theoretical matters that he felt most at home. But he suspected he was making himself out a bore, and he was prepared to belittle everything he held important if it would gain him a point.

'You should meet our neighbor, Mr. Oblonski,' suggested Mrs. Pettigrew. 'He's bookish too.'

David frowned. He did not take to her choice of words at all, feeling that it made him out as something of a prig. While he sought for some way to swerve the conversation from this unhealthy course, he squirmingly tried to adjust himself to the concrete bench. David was rather thinly padded, and the layer of newspaper failed wretchedly to make up the deficit.

He did not get a chance to say any more, however, because just then an astonishing thing happened.

Under the circumstances, it was the last thing he would have expected to occur. He was just debating whether it would be too rash of him at this early stage

to slide an inch or two closer, when suddenly Mrs. Pettigrew's hand darted out and clutched his arm sharply.

David stared at her, completely speechless.

Immediately she let go. He noticed that she looked pale, rather shaken. Doubtless the poor girl was abashed at her own uncontrollable charge of passion. For his part, David did his best to act as though such an event were to be expected as a matter of course. With an effort he summoned an expression of unconcern which concealed, he hoped, his astonishment at this unforeseen trend. David was optimistic, but he was not conceited. He had expected an hour might pass before their relationship would have advanced to this point. Now he was not certain what to do next.

He noticed though, that her color did not return. She sat quite still on the bench, pale and tense. A new thought occurred to him.

'Aren't you feeling well?'

'No.' Catherine raised her hand to her forehead. 'I have a headache—I feel rather weak.'

David appeared even more distressed than Mrs. Pettigrew by this ill-timed malady. He considered slipping his arm tenderly about her waist. But he was at all times a logical person, and logically he was unable to see how putting an arm around one's waist could help a pain in the head.

'Maybe you'd like me to walk you home.'

Catherine jumped nervously to her feet. 'Yes, I must go back now.'

Back in her apartment again, Mrs. Pettigrew locked the door and dropped weakly into a chair. The man



had been standing no more than ten yards from the park bench behind a tall bush, so that only his head protruded. That first glimpse of him, when their eyes met, had sent a chill through her. She wasn't sure why. It was something about the way he was watching her—with the pitiful, pleading expression of a crippled animal. She had never been looked at by a human being in that way before. Reaching down to pick up a cigarette, Catherine noticed that her hand was shaking. She had no idea who the man was. Then, as she struck a match, as her eyes moved to the level of the window, she remembered. It was like the painful thrust of a sharp instrument.

She remembered only the bill cap, for yesterday the man's face had made no impression. Since then, she had not given the incident a thought. Now the recollection of what she had done in a foolish moment left her stunned. There was no justification for her act, and she searched for none. It had been one of those impulses a person sometimes yielded to, which, in retrospect, became so monstrous that one's actions seemed to have been motivated by some outside force.

Through power of will she tried to shut it from her mind, to make herself disbelieve that any such thing had occurred. In time, of course, the episode would shrivel into insignificance. But for the present the course of momentum was all in the other direction. Above all else one question hung menacingly. What would her husband do if he found out? He had an extraordinary jealousy where she was concerned, and Catherine had accommodated herself to this by forcing her conduct to the point of discourtesy toward other men when he

was around. There had been a few times when she'd actually been frightened by his temper. He was not utterly humorless in the dense way some men are, but his nature was such that whimsy irritated him. To his mind, nothing lacked a rational explanation. He would never have understood that in the boredom of a hot afternoon one might do something lightly, trivially, with no premeditation or afterthought. She could picture the redness rising slowly in his neck as she tried to explain to him that she had stood in her underclothes and smiled at a strange man because she felt good after one drink of whiskey.

Catherine put out her cigarette and stood up. Stepping over to the hall closet, she took out the dust mop. Physical activity was what she needed now. Chances are, nothing will come of it, she decided—nothing at all.

### 3

After leaving Mrs. Pettigrew at her door, David returned to his own room to find his uncle standing trouserless before the mirror. Hubert had on one of David's white shirts and appeared to be trying to decide whether the garment suited his high standards. Fortunately for his own sense of dignity, the mirror stopped at his waist. The shirt tail fluttering above his skinny legs made him look like a grotesque bird.

As David slammed the door, Mr. Willoughby glanced up, meeting his nephew's dour nod with a merry one.

'How are you this morning, my boy?'

'That's my last clean shirt,' David observed curtly.

'Well, luckily it fits.' Holding up a green polka-dot tie, he rejected it with a scowl and selected a quieter blue. 'Do you often wear this one with your gray suit?' he asked.

David's glance darted to the unmade bed, to his gray summer suit which lay neatly folded on top of the twisted sheets. 'Look here, Uncle Hubert——'

'The trousers are a little tight in the waist, but I don't think the coat's a bad fit, do you?' Stepping over to the bed, he slipped into the coat and faced his nephew for inspection. 'Not bad, eh?'

David nodded without enthusiasm, but a cheering thought caused him to brighten. 'It won't work. The pants are bound to be too short.'

'Oh, I've remedied that,' his uncle replied confidently. He pointed at the cuffs.

David saw that they had been turned down. An effort had been made to pick away the lint, but the former crease still showed an inch or so from the bottom.

'Of course, cuffless trousers are definitely passé,' he conceded with deepening pensiveness, 'but it's a case of making do with what you've got.'

'What's the matter with your suit?' David inquired.

'Oh, I couldn't wear that, not in this weather. I've got a luncheon engagement this noon. Means everything in the world for me to be dressed right.'

For a moment David entertained the fantastic hypothesis that his uncle intended to get a job. This, however, he passed over almost at once. The old shark was obviously up to something. He was examining his image with a slight frown, as though he felt it needed

some consummating touch. He found it at last in one of the upper drawers: a blue silk handkerchief which he thrust into the breast pocket. Satisfied, he turned around with a smile.

'Yes, my boy, if all goes well, we may be parting company soon.'

David absorbed this news with skepticism. On a few other occasions his uncle had made similar announcements, only to return home very late, looking weary and dispirited.

'It seems to me you're getting dressed up kind of early for lunch.'

'Yes, well I have a few things to go over at the office before we close the deal.'

David went into the kitchenette and turned on the fire under the coffee pot. Whenever his uncle began talking about *the office*, a streak of family loyalty impelled him to leave the room. It didn't embarrass him particularly that his mother's brother was a crook, so long as he didn't sound like one. Taking a cup from the shelf, he poured out the lukewarm coffee and added a little canned milk. When he went back into the other room, Uncle Hubert was gone.

#### 4

It was shortly after noon when Mr. Willoughby found himself back on Trenton Street. Unmistakably, some of the jauntiness had gone out of his step. While he walked, the sun burned down out of a cloudless sky. Taking off his nephew's coat, he folded it over his arm and plodded on. It had been a profitless and dis-

couraging morning, and he was in dismal spirits. He had reason to be. A letter in the morning mail had given him cause to think that his luck had taken a favorable turn, but the venture had fizzled, and he was now no better off than ever. In fact, considerably worse. He'd had the bad fortune to encounter in a hotel lobby a man whom he had once deftly relieved of three hundred dollars. This person had been willing to forget the offense if he would produce the money within two days, and this, of course, Mr. Willoughby was in no position to do.

The thought of the reckoning two days hence made him shudder. There must be some place, he thought, where a person could get hold of three hundred dollars in a hurry. He filed through his skimpy list of acquaintances without any real hope, for he had already rejected them one by one several weeks ago, and at the end of the line had been his nephew. David, of course, could be no help in this case, but perhaps one of David's friends . . .

An idea began to work its way into Hubert Willoughby's resourceful mind. The English girl, Mrs. Pettigrew. According to David, she was a respectable housewife. Surely her respectability must be worth three hundred dollars. With all the adroitness of one accustomed to rapid shifts of fortune, he began to explore this new escape. Its simplicity alone was appealing. What could be easier than to pay a social visit to a young lady, and during the course of the conversation, inform her, in an oblique way, that for a specified sum one would refrain from mentioning to her husband that she had been observed in a most unladylike breach

of good taste. How far her temptations had actually carried her was not in this instance pertinent. Society disapproved of young wives who stood scantily dressed and smiled at strange men in the streets, an intolerance shared with perhaps even greater fervor by young husbands.

Thus, within the space of five minutes was Mr. Willoughby's course decided. Nevertheless, as he trudged toward Mrs. Pettigrew's apartment, he did not experience the surge of optimism that usually accompanied a new idea. A man had his principles, after all. It stung him bitterly that he should be forced to such a gross indelicacy. Blackmailers had always been, in his opinion, the most despicable of parasitic vermin, possessing neither talent nor charm. Only the most acute desperation would excuse the crude measure of trading on a lady's indiscretions. But recalling his own predicament, he reminded himself ruefully that he was indeed a desperate man.

The outside door was unlocked. As he mounted the stairs, he mentally recited to himself the simple ruse he intended to employ in order to gain entrance to the room. At the top of the stairs he took out his handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his face. Then he knocked lightly.

The door opened several inches and Mrs. Pettigrew appeared.

'Yes?'

'Good afternoon, Mrs. Pettigrew,' he said genially. 'I'm with the Corn Belt Insurance Company. You requested some information, I believe, concerning our life-insurance coverage.'

She looked at him doubtfully. 'Why, no, not that I know of. You must have the wrong party.'

'Then your husband, perhaps. Is Mr. Pettigrew in by any chance?'

'No, he's out of town. I'm sorry.'

As the fragmentary view of Mrs. Pettigrew diminished, he was pushed to an ungentlemanly action. Giving the door a hard thrust, he crossed the threshold and closed it quickly behind him.

A mingled expression of fright and indignation crossed her face as she stepped back.

Mr. Willoughby hoped to placate her by his casual manner. 'Come have a seat,' he invited, waving toward a chair.

'What is this?' she demanded. 'I don't know you.'

'That's so,' he agreed amiably, 'but just because we aren't friends doesn't mean we have to be enemies. May I sit down?'

'No, you may not.'

But Mr. Willoughby had already lowered himself into the hot, plushy depths of a hideously constructed piece of furniture. As he did so, he found himself facing a large, gilt-framed picture of a fruit bowl. Below this, as if to emphasize the technical fidelity of the artist, rested a bowl of wax fruit. Involuntarily, Mr. Willoughby grimaced. Such lack of taste could be overlooked in more opulent surroundings. Here, the thing dominated the room, and even when he turned his eyes away, it was only to come upon a gilded chalk incense burner in the form of an Oriental god.

Leaning back, he fixed his eyes pleasantly on Mrs. Pettigrew's distraught face. 'Don't you really think

you'd better sit down, my dear? This heat's enough to subdue anybody without getting yourself all worked up.'

His words seemed to have a soothing effect. While she did not obey his invitation to sit down, she appeared to be watching him more with curiosity than anger. This was a development familiar to Mr. Willoughby, and he noted it with satisfaction. Crossing his legs, he took out a cigar.

'I'm afraid, Mrs. Pettigrew, that I'm not bringing you very cheerful news,' he remarked as he struck a match and puffed at the cigar. 'I confess my capacity is somewhat different than I represented to you.'

He paused, and she waited in bewildered silence for him to go on.

'Now please understand, before I go any farther, Mrs. Pettigrew, that I don't pretend to be the arbiter of moral conduct. But it happens that the party which sent me feels that certain actions of yours—ah—have not been the sort which give a neighborhood a good name. You can appreciate what I mean, I'm sure.'

A sudden flush rose in her cheek, and, touched by her discomfiture, he tactfully looked away.

'The attitude this party takes,' he continued in a lowered tone, 'is that, while what you do privately is your own affair, when it becomes open, ah, public, so to speak, the situation changes somewhat. For you, that is, as well as for this other party.'

He felt that he had not expressed himself well. There was no question, however, that his words had found their mark. Leaning back limply against the door, she put her hand over her eyes. Mr. Willoughby fastened his attention painfully on his burning cigar. He was



not enjoying the smoke, but it afforded him a focal point while he searched his mind for some discreet phrase, some way to let her understand that he did not view her conduct through the eyes of a moral zealot. He was a disinterested emissary, no more.

Without raising her head, Mrs. Pettigrew spoke then, but her voice was pitched so low that she seemed more to be addressing herself than the visitor. 'I haven't done anything wrong.'

Mr. Willoughby felt summoned to further reassurances on her behalf. 'Of course, nothing illegally, my dear. In fact, I believe much as you do that American standards are altogether too narrow. But we do not set the pace—you and I. This party, I'm afraid, still represents the majority, odious though that fact is to both of us.' He sighed. 'I, too, wish it were otherwise.'

Mr. Willoughby's queer mode of speaking caused Mrs. Pettigrew to lift her eyes.

'Fortunately, all I've got to say isn't bad news. You see, this party can be induced to forget everything.' He sought to suppress her rising expression of protest by adding hastily, 'Of course, with this person, sin is something of an obsession. Small indiscretions tend to be magnified, I'll grant you. But that wouldn't make you any less uncomfortable when the word is spread about. Would it now?'

Something, perhaps the intruder's insufferable self-possession, caused Mrs. Pettigrew suddenly to do a bold thing. With her hands on her hips, she advanced belligerently to where he was sitting. 'I don't know what your business is,' she said heatedly, 'but I think you'd better leave now.'

A fat plume of smoke billowed around Mr. Willoughby's placid face. He'd had enough experience in affairs of this sort to recognize a bluff. Doubtless much of his success in his relations with women was due to the fact that his mind worked so much like theirs. Nevertheless, he was still amused at each instance of the strange feminine sense of propriety. Once a lady began indulging in questionable recreations, one might think she would sportingly forfeit the privilege of indignation when she got caught. But Mr. Willoughby was prone to view such breaches of logic with tolerance.

'Madam, I don't much relish my job as intermediary.' He found a modicum of solace in the word, since it was not in a sense altogether inaccurate. 'But it would be a pity if misunderstandings were to develop between you and your husband out of what was witnessed yesterday afternoon.'

Catherine, her brief show of hostility gone, wilted into a chair. 'Can't you understand? Nothing happened. There's been some kind of a mistake.'

'Oh, my dear, you needn't justify your behavior to me. I'm sure you're not in the habit of exhibiting yourself in that manner. No doubt he was a very good-looking young man.'

'Good looking! I didn't even notice how he looked. Don't you see, I just happened to be standing at the window. It was hot and I'd taken a little whiskey. I don't know why.' She buried her face in her hands. 'I didn't mean anything wrong.'

Mr. Willoughby watched this display with the detachment of one who has observed similar scenes many

times before. Tears were inevitable now, and when they came, he puffed indifferently on his cigar.

'I didn't do anything wrong,' she sobbed.

He waited for the first onrush of tears to subside before continuing. The remark about the liquor had been so typical; it was the ultimate catch-all for feminine lapses in conduct. He watched her with a kindly smile. Women—what a strange, irrational, transparent species. And how well fared the man who humored their absurd, ritualistic gestures.

As she dried her eyes, he saw no point in further postponing his climax. He got slowly to his feet.

'Don't get too upset, my dear. I've said there's some good news, and there is. I guarantee that your husband will never find out a thing. All my party asks is three hundred dollars.'

For a moment, Catherine did not appear to understand what he was talking about.

'Are you serious?'

'I'm afraid this other person is.'

'But I haven't any such amount as that.'

He shrugged. 'Then I'm sorry for you.'

There was a look of hurt dismay, a quivering chin, and once more—tears.

This time Mr. Willoughby felt himself too intimately involved in her humiliation to look on dispassionately. It was disconcerting that his tender-heartedness should compel him to share her misery. He began to walk, covering the room in an elliptical path which carried him from the window to the door and back again to the window, where he paused as if expecting something momentous to occur out there in the street.

Where were all the eloquent lines that had soothed away so many tears in the past? Once he put his hand gently on her shoulder, but she thrust it away with such violence that he recoiled. There was really nothing for him to say. He realized that if by her actions she had brought this predicament on herself, it was hardly his place to point this out. After a while the sobbing ceased, and Mr. Willoughby turned around to find himself being stared at by two pink and swollen eyes.

He cleared his throat noisily. 'Of course, you understand this party didn't expect you to have the money on hand,' he said consolingly. 'If you have it by to-morrow evening, that should be quite satisfactory.'

As she listened to this, Catherine appeared to be on the brink of a new outburst. 'How can I?'

But Mr. Willoughby was already moving toward the door. He turned back as he took hold of the knob. 'I'm sure you can manage some way or other, my dear. A pretty girl like you. You can find a way.'

## 5

When he had gone, Catherine walked over and drew the shades. She was too frightened now for tears. At the moment it did not enter her head that she might be able to raise three hundred dollars, and she did not dwell on this possibility at all. What obsessed her was the fear of what her husband would do when he found out. It was all so preposterous. She sat down stiffly and tried to think what she should do. Of course they had a little money in their joint savings account, probably

not more than a hundred dollars. But her fur coat had cost over twice that. Together with an old ring she had, it might bring the extra two hundred at one of those pawn shops on Harnum Street. Encouraged by this hopeful inspiration, she opened the writing desk and took out the bank book. Deposited to their credit was the sum of \$118.24. Perhaps she would not even have to pawn the ring.

It was now twenty-five minutes past two. Hurriedly Catherine began to change her clothes. The bank would be closed before she could get there today, but that was no matter. Tomorrow would be soon enough. The important thing now was to see what she could get for the coat. Ten minutes later she stepped out into the hot, silent street and began walking in the direction of Fourteenth.

There were few people out at this hour. The heat was like a sickness, like a plague that had decimated the population and driven the survivors in behind closed doors. By nightfall the reports of its ravages would be coming in. A laborer felled by sunstroke, an old man gone into a fatal coma as he was transplanting a geranium, a young girl drowned . . . For Catherine, each step became increasingly painful as the searing heat scorched through the thin soles of her light sandals. At one corner, as she paused, she noticed a middle-aged woman looking curiously at the fur coat draped over her arm.

It was a beautiful fur. Charles had bought it for her shortly after Christmas. For the first time it occurred to her that if she pawned the coat, she might not be able to raise the money to get it back. At the moment

there seemed no likelihood that she would ever need a fur coat again. Emotionally, it was inconceivable that six months from now she might trudge this same street, numb from the cold, fighting the frigid blasts that swept in from the river. Nevertheless, that time would come, and what then could she say to explain the lost coat? She might tell him she had left it on the bus, or that the coat had been stolen while she was airing it on the line. Just now she was pushed by something far more urgent than a missing fur. Turning onto Harnum Street, she entered the open door of the first pawn shop in the block.

A man was sitting at the rear of the store, examining the interior of a watch. As Mrs. Pettigrew approached, he glanced up at her without interest, and returned to his work. It was a dark, cluttered room crowded with dusty mechanical objects—watches, cameras, binoculars. Something about the way these articles were placed in narrow pigeon holes and high gloomy shelves gave them the same antiquated, forlorn look as the shop itself. Except for a stack of mildewed army raincoats, she did not see any garments on display.

‘Do you lend money on clothes?’ she asked.

The man was probing into a watch with a tiny screw driver. After several seconds he laid it down and picked up a stained cigarette. He had a thin, mournful face. The long strands of his black hair had been combed earlier, but they fell away now in two greasy loops, coming together above his eyes. He put the cigarette between his lips, struck a match, and appraised her impassively.

'Sometimes.'

'How much could I get on this?'

He got up and felt the coat as she laid it on the counter.

'You looking for a loan, or do you want to sell it?'

She hesitated. 'Whichever brings the most.'

Holding up the bulky coat at arm's length, he compared it suspiciously with Mrs. Pettigrew's slender figure. 'This yours?'

She reddened slightly. 'Of course.'

'Hmm.' Running his hand in under the lining, he inspected it without enthusiasm. 'Thirty dollars.'

'What? But it cost over two hundred.'

He shrugged. 'See this suit I got on?' He lifted his knee to display his pant leg. 'Paid sixty-five dollars for it. Know what I could get out of it? Seven, eight dollars. Maybe ten.'

'I know,' Catherine protested, 'but I just bought the coat this winter. It's hardly been worn. It's the same as new.'

The man listened to this wearily. 'Lady,' he said, 'you wear an article of clothing around the block—I don't care what it is—and it's used. They's no market for used clothes.'

Dejectedly she picked it up and stroked the fur. 'I should think there would be a lot of women who'd be glad to get a coat like this.'

'Not for the kind of cash you seem to have in mind. Why, I can sell coats like that new for a hundred dollars, and still make money.' He sat down again. 'Oh, I might go thirty-five, but that's it.'

Mrs. Pettigrew walked away. As she went out, she

glanced back at the proprietor who was already absorbed in the insides of the watch.

On this block there were five pawn shops. Catherine visited them one after the other. Then she moved on to the next block. By three-fifteen she had given up. Thirty-five dollars was the highest offer she had received. By this time the coat bore damp lines where it had been folded over her arm. She began the long, hot walk home. It was ten blocks back to the apartment, and the temperature was now approaching its apex. She became thirsty and she looked about her for a drugstore. None was in sight, but up ahead, toward the middle of the block, she noticed in large black letters the words *Mayflower Cocktail Lounge*, and below this, *Booths for Ladies*.

Catherine went inside and sat down at a table. In contrast to the brilliant sunlight, the light here was subdued almost to extinction. A blue neon glowed wanly along the length of the mirrored bar, but on the other side of the room the booths were draped in blackness. The air was dry and cool, so cool that she would have drawn the coat up around her shoulders except that she was aware it would have looked absurd. The bartender, a heavy-set man with a hearty laugh, was playing shuffleboard with his only customer. He came over briskly and smiled at Mrs. Pettigrew.

'Just give me something cold,' she said. 'A coke, I guess.'

'Bourbon and coke?'

'No bourbon. A coke with lots of ice, please.'

While she waited for him to return, Catherine tapped her fingers nervously on the table. Now that her idea



had been crushed, she decided she must write her husband and tell him exactly what had happened on Wednesday afternoon. But no matter what tentative choice of words came to mind, she invariably found herself confronted with that expression of loathing which she had seen come into his face only once—when a drunken colonel had arrogantly ordered him to carry his bags.

The bartender set down the glass.

As she relaxed in the comfortable seat, some of her anxiety began to lift. There was no need to tell her husband anything. Already she was beginning to wonder why she had let herself get so worked up over what was in reality a trivial matter. What, after all, could the man with the absurd mustache do? Admittedly he'd given her a scare at first, but the whole thing was ridiculous. If he dared to show his face again, she would threaten to call the police. She'd show him she wasn't as frightened as he evidently believed. When you got down to it, she decided, he was the one who had cause to be worried—for attempting blackmail. Catherine finished her coke and left the bar in considerably improved spirits.

When she got home, she put the coat back in the moth bag. Then she took a shower, changed into a clean dress, and went into the living-room. By coincidence, just as she sat down, as she lifted a cigarette to her lips, she heard the clock sound four times. She laid down the cigarette. In spite of her resolution to put it all out of her mind, some force she could not resist compelled her to get up and edge toward the window. She peered out uneasily. The street was quite empty.

After the caustic episode at breakfast, Mr. Folger had resolved not to return home until late that night. Having been deprived of his customary bacon and eggs, he labored through the morning in a cantankerous and vengeful mood, brooding over the injustice of it. A man had few enough pleasures on sixty dollars a week, he reasoned bitterly, without having to give up his breakfast. It wasn't right. His work suffered noticeably as he fretfully contemplated the condition of his viscera. He possessed little knowledge of internal anatomy, but he had a morbid picture of a shrunken sack inside of him, hanging like a wizened berry, and this because of a careless, spiteful woman. Unfortunately, his modest status in the office did not even permit him the vindictive solace of bullying inferiors. To anyone who accosted him during the morning, he was sullenly discourteous, but in such a passive way that it only deepened his frustration. To a sympathetic observer it must have seemed that Mr. Folger possessed formidable qualifications for misanthropy. What better grounds could there be for hating mankind than to find oneself, at forty-five, an underpaid clerk with falling hair, married to an ill-natured woman?

But Mr. Folger was temperamentally unfitted for cynicism. He had never acquired the habit of attributing his occasional periods of disenchantment to the gift of superior insight. He had an empty belly and he was sore at his wife, and for the life of him he wouldn't have been able to see how a man could make any more

of it than that. As soon as he had eaten a warm lunch, his rancor was already beginning to melt. But this didn't mean he had changed his mind about not going home from work. Even the gluttonous felicity of an overflowing stomach did not alter that. It was something he had decided on, and he meant to stick by it. In fact, as the afternoon wore on, he was actually rather pleased that she had given him good reason to stay out. He hadn't gotten into a good poker game in months. At five o'clock he locked his desk with a happy sigh and took his straw hat from the rack. Mr. Folger was of the impression that a straw hat somehow canceled the plebianizing effect of his lunch box, although today, of course, this measure would not have been necessary, since Myra had not packed him a lunch.

Emerging from the elevator, he pushed through a small cluster of clerks and stenographers who stood looking out at the street with the same grim, reluctant expressions that they wore when viewing a cloudburst. Soon they would have to leave the air-conditioned building, and this unhappy prospect showed in their faces. As usual, Mr. Folger did not even break stride as he marched through the swinging door. But he always paid for his boldness during those first few seconds. He could never quite remember how bad it really was. Almost instantly a prickling rash of perspiration broke out over his body. To his left, a woman stopped and put her hand to her forehead, swaying slightly. Mr. Folger, who was no knight, quickened his step. Two blocks down the street, he turned in at the Comet Recreation Parlor.

The evening poker game was not yet in progress. In

the back room, three men sat silently playing black jack, a game Mr. Folger did not care for. He took a seat at the bar and ordered a corned beef sandwich. The sight of himself in the mirror made him pause, for he had forgotten that he was beginning a mustache. Twisting his head from side to side, he tried to examine it through the eyes of a stranger. A mustache radically revises some men's appearance, making them look distinguished or sinister or prim. On Mr. Folger's fleshy face, it was no more than a disorderly blob. He still looked very much like himself, only a little more careless than usual. But far from being disturbed by this realization, he merely bit into a dill pickle and turned his mind to other matters.

By the time he had finished his sandwich, the black jack game had developed into four-handed stud. Mr. Folger entered the room silently, happily, and dropped into an empty seat. For him the game began at a quarter to six, when he opened his wallet and brought out a five-dollar bill.

At ten thirty he leaned over to the man on his right and in a whispered, embarrassed voice borrowed money for carfare home.

The bus let him off three blocks from Trenton Street. He was as yet too stunned by the catastrophe to feel anything. But as he passed a drugstore, the painful fact struck him that he did not have the price of a package of cigarettes. The tragedy of it was that he needed a cigarette now more than ever. His mouth tightened as the cardboard girl in the druggist's window smilingly extended a pack of Chesterfields. For an instant he had the weird notion that she was speaking to him.

'Are you on your way home, Mr. Folger?'

He started from his daze. It was the English girl, Mrs. Pettigrew. Evidently she had just come out of the drugstore; she was carrying a magazine.

He nodded silently.

Mrs. Pettigrew looked tired. She essayed a timid smile, which faded at once before his implacability. 'I thought I might walk with you,' she suggested. 'It's so dark along that street.'

'Of course.'

He did not take her arm. Mr. Folger had never in his life taken a woman's arm. They walked together in silence, and when they turned the corner in the direction of Trenton Street, he noticed that she seemed to be glancing about her skittishly. He puzzled over this but briefly. Mr. Folger did not have an exploratory bent, particularly when it came to examining women's exaggerated reactions to the dark.

'Hot enough for you, I suppose,' he offered cautiously.

'Isn't it awful?'

'It can't last, though,' he added with pontifical conviction.

'I beg your pardon?'

'When the heat gets this bad, it can't possibly last for long.'

'Oh, is that so; is that so?'

She embraced his remark with such unhesitating eagerness, he was compelled to consider what had made him say it. Did it happen to be the truth, or had the words just leaped to his tongue? It was not that Mr. Folger seriously suspected himself of having an original idea, but he had always been prone to accept as an

unquestionable fact any sentiment which had been uttered three times in the same words. Of late he was becoming sensitive about it, because more than once he had found himself quoting two opposing views in the same conversation.

Automatically he reached into the pocket where he kept his cigarettes, and winced. Glancing guardedly at Mrs. Pettigrew, he wondered if it would be improper of him to ask her for one. Of course his wife would undoubtedly have a pack, but she smoked an imported brand which he pretended to find nauseating. She would think it was strange if he asked for one of hers.

They were approaching the apartment house. It really was quite dark in this neighborhood. He supposed he couldn't blame a woman for not wanting to walk it alone. A silhouette loomed furrily against a distant street light.

'I wonder what that guy's standing there for,' he remarked.

Mrs. Pettigrew stopped. Her voice, suddenly behind him, had shrunk to a taut whisper. 'Who? Where?'

He paused, waiting for her, wanting to laugh. What a damned silly lot women were.

'Over there. That cab driver.'

The driver was leaning against his cab, swearing softly to himself. Apparently he had just been ditched by a fare. He got in then, still muttering with subdued wrath, and roared off savagely in low gear, transmitting his repressed fury to the machine.

'At least a man could beat his horse where it hurt,' he commented, and strained to read her expression in the near darkness.

But Mrs. Pettigrew appeared rather shaken. When they reached the top of the cement steps, she stood silently to one side, waiting for him to unlock the door.

He searched methodically through his pockets and then went through them again.

'I have my key,' she offered, 'if you've forgotten yours.'

'To tell you the truth,' he lied, 'I was looking for a cigarette. I guess I'll have to walk back to the drug-store.'

'Oh, there's no need for that. I have an extra pack upstairs. You can pay me back tomorrow.'

It was even more than Mr. Folger had hoped for. He followed her up the stairs to her apartment. Just how he expected to repay her tomorrow did not for the moment occupy a very significant place in his mind. He needed a cigarette.

However, Mrs. Pettigrew discovered that she had been mistaken. She gave what seemed to Mr. Folger an unnecessarily detailed excuse for having smoked the extra pack, since they were her own. But put in five words or fifty, the fact did not change. No cigarettes. Disconsolately he went down to face his wife.

Myra Folger did not even raise her eyes when he entered. She sat holding a novel rigidly before her face, and her only reaction as he clumped heavily across the floor was to bend an inch closer to the book. Mr. Folger put his hat on the closet shelf and returned to the living-room to find that her tight, intense expression had not wavered. Sprawling noisily into his usual chair, he yawned elaborately in a series of descending notes that ended with a guttural sigh.

She lowered her book, scrutinized him briefly with a look of smoldering disgust, and then resumed her reading.

Removing his shoe, Mr. Folger serenely scratched his toes. Nothing in his life with Myra had prepared him for so uneventful a reception. He could only suppose she was consolidating herself for a sudden rush when his guard was down. He yawned again. It really didn't much matter to him one way or the other. In fact, he found it oddly comforting to be back here with Myra. In her presence his fiasco became more excusable, and even took on a little merit as he reflected that she would be as much deprived by his loss as he would. It had been her fault, after all. Picking up his pipe from the end table, he dipped it into the humidor of stale tobacco.

He was priming the bowl with his thumb when Myra closed her book with a sharp, foreboding crack and dropped it on the rug.

'How can you just sit there and . . .'

She choked off, but Mr. Folger, after the first startled moment, gallantly picked up her sentence.

' . . . fill my pipe.'

'Oh!' She was actually trembling, and her pale lips narrowed to a thin line.

Setting the pipe between his teeth, he eyed her with mild curiosity. Myra had a number of failings, but she had not been blessed with the shortcoming of inarticulateness. He could not hope it would last, and it didn't.

'I know where you've been,' she exploded with a sudden, irate volubility. 'Don't sit there so fat and smug and think you've put one over on me. I heard you come



in. I know where you've been. If you've got the idea . . .'

Out of long practice, Mr. Folger detached himself as a receptive instrument for his wife's obloquy. As he watched her, he squinted slightly. It struck him as extraordinary that in the nine years he had been married to Myra, he had never noticed that she had an Adam's apple. Was it because she was thinner than she used to be? While he pondered this, fragments of her invective burst into his consciousness.

' . . . just one thing I want to make clear. Just one thing. Don't ever make the mistake of thinking you're clever, because you're not . . . '

Of course, during the period when he had been taken with Myra, it had not been that part of her anatomy which interested him. But even so—

'What are you staring at, you damned fool?'

Mr. Folger made a lengthy ritual of lighting his pipe, protracting the performance as long as he could without making a parody of it. He often employed such tranquil gestures when his wife made some strident demand.

'What were you saying?' he inquired blandly.

Myra gasped. But she did not intend to let him off so readily. 'I know you were out with her tonight, so don't bother lying.'

'Her?'

Mr. Folger was no actor. His bewilderment was so obviously genuine that anyone with a less suspicious nature than Myra's would have given up.

'It's true, isn't it?'

He opened his mouth dumbly, almost losing his pipe.

There was an absurdity about this scene which neither of them, each for his own reason, could quite grasp. Mr. Folger undeniably had a low opinion of women. But there was a genuine, if misguided, honesty about his attitude that was far removed from the sort of cynicism which is born of a series of luckless ventures in that sphere. Perhaps it was primarily a matter of interest. Mr. Folger happened to prefer baseball. When one of the men at the office had remarked that an occasional conquest was as vital to a man's ego as an elaborate wedding ceremony was to a woman's, he had not felt outraged. He had simply set it down as damned nonsense. All of this Myra should have known.

But she repeated the question with baiting persistence, as if all she needed was to draw enemy fire in order to ride triumphantly over his positions.

'Isn't it true? Answer me!'

Mr. Folger sucked vigorously. It was an old pipe, fouled from excessive use and insufficient cleaning, but a heavy 'pull drew the maple-scented smoke bitingly against his tongue. As he exhaled, he studied his wife with a museful countenance. The clouded air failed to soften her tense, sharp features.

'Myra.' His voice was bored, a little weary. 'Just what in hell are you talking about?'

'That woman upstairs,' she snapped. 'Mrs. Pettigrew. I know you've been out somewhere with her. So don't try and . . .'

Mr. Folger withdrew to consider this new, fantastic indictment. He did not laugh outright, though he was tempted to. Mrs. Pettigrew. Good Lord, practically a child. This woman was really losing her mind.

A pause in the verbal torrent caused him to relax his defenses. Then he heard her add in a voice that was menacing in its self-control, 'Well, what have you got to say?'

He looked at her blankly. 'Is there something you haven't already said?'

'You don't deny it then?'

'Damned if I can see the point in that.'

Myra drew a prolonged breath that seemed to strain her meager chest. When she spoke, her head recoiled slightly, as if from the force of her own words.

'You filthy animal!'

To this Mr. Folger made no immediate response. He continued to draw on his pipe, his animosity revealing itself only in the short, charged puffs that erupted periodically from between his clenched teeth. When he'd had enough, he laid the pipe aside and stood up.

'Some day, Myra, you're going to find yourself a mighty sorry woman. You really are.'

With this he left her, and went in to get ready for bed.



**PART FOUR**

*Friday*



## *Friday*

### *1*

**M**YRA FOLGER, when she awoke the next morning, was too ill to get out of bed. Her husband, for reasons of his own, had not awakened her, and it was nine o'clock before she opened her eyes to discover the sun coming into the room. Sometimes, when she did not feel well, it gave her a perverse satisfaction to lie in bed and contemplate the cruelties that had been perpetrated against her. Today, however, the suffering was too intense to be counted a comfort. The pillow was like a vise around her throbbing head, and when she raised up the torment became unbearable. Myra had never had a headache quite like this before. It was characteristic of her sensitive constitution that she possessed a low tolerance for pain. Once, when a hot pan had fallen on her toe, she had kept her husband up all night alternately fetching hot and cold packs, although neither seemed to have much effect. But this was more than just a physical pain. It seemed to draw all the strength from her frail body, leaving her too exhausted to move.

From beneath the covers Myra extracted a thin, bloodless hand, and when she looked at it, gave a little cry. She knew that she must get the doctor at once. During such times as this, phrases from popular medical literature, which she read so avidly, revisited her with

terrifying clarity. She was unable to resist the fascination of any ill-omened prognosis. As she brooded on it, she began to be possessed by the terrifying suspicion that in this weakened state her body was a prey to some sinister disease which could consume her in a rapid stroke. Myra shuddered. She did not want to die. Although she hated what life had thus far given her, one day very soon everything would change. This consoling refuge she always kept by her. The obvious, blunt impossibility of it she could no more afford to acknowledge than she could force her own hand to end life itself by slashing the blue veins of her wrist.

With what seemed to her extraordinary courage, Myra thrust away the damp sheet and sat up. She did not reach for her slippers, but padded barefooted into the living-room, using the furniture for support. When she reached the telephone, she dialed Dr. Osborn's number. The secretary answered, and Myra asked for the doctor.

'He's busy right now. Can I help you?'

'I won't take up his time,' Myra pleaded. 'I just want to speak to him for a minute.'

'I'm sorry. Doctor can't be disturbed when he's in consultation.'

Myra knew this was not true. More than once, as she had been describing to him some new ailment, she had been obliged to hold off while he picked up the phone and talked to another patient.

'Just tell Dr. Osborn that Mrs. Folger has to speak to him about something extremely urgent.'

This time the other did not reply, and a moment later Myra was listening to the resonant voice of the physician.



'Yes. May I help you?'

'Doctor, this is Mrs. Folger. Could you come out right away?'

'What seems to be the matter, Mrs. Folger?'

'I'm terribly sick, Doctor. My head's splitting and I'm so weak I can hardly move.'

'Have you tried taking aspirin?'

'Aspirin!' She echoed the word with a tone of reproachful disgust. 'This is no time for aspirin. Can't you understand? I'm sick, and I'm here alone.'

There was a moment's pause, then he spoke again. 'Well, it'll be an hour anyway, Mrs. Folger. I can't possibly make it any sooner than that.'

'I'll be expecting you then.'

Instead of returning to the bedroom, Myra established a bed for herself on the sofa. It struck her as just one more of the bitter injustices which made up her life that she had no one to look after her while she was in this condition. She felt that illness could be tolerably endured if she had a colored servant to arrange the pillows and massage her back and bring her bowls of onion soup.

Already, though, the anticipation of the doctor's arrival caused her to feel a little better. He was the only person in the world who encouraged her to talk about herself. Although listening to patients' complaints was, of course, his business, she fancied that in her case something about her personality caused him to put aside his customary professional attitude and view her with more personal interest. For one thing, they often discussed matters in no way related to medicine. Afterward, more often than not, Myra couldn't even remember what

they had talked about, but she usually felt better for the visit all the same.

It was almost precisely one hour from the time she had called that Myra saw Dr. Osborn's green Buick pull up in front of the house. Because she felt that to be found resting comfortably on the sofa might suggest recuperation, she hurried back to her bed. From there she called weakly for him to enter.

This was the first time the doctor had visited Mrs. Folger at her home. As he walked into the bedroom, Myra suddenly regretted that she had required him to see her here. Dr. Osborn was fifty, slightly above average height. In spite of the heat, he was wearing a gray double-breasted suit. He set his bag on the floor and turned to Mrs. Folger with a faint smile.

'Well, I must say you're looking healthy for a person who's supposed to be sick.'

Myra made a sour face. His stereotyped preliminaries never failed to irritate her. He always seemed to forget for the first few minutes that she was on to the old routine and expected a little more.

'I *am* sick, Doctor.'

'Your color's good.'

'How can you say that?' she retorted angrily. 'I'm as white as a sheet.'

'What's the trouble this morning?' he asked softly, as he drew up a chair.

Noting that his face now reflected her own seriousness, Myra felt encouraged to launch into her symptoms. She raised up slightly, moaned, and fell back again.

'Back acting up, Mrs. Folger?'

'It's my head this time, Doctor. I haven't had a bad headache in weeks. But it's more than that. I feel—I can't explain it—as if all my strength had drained away.'

Taking hold of her wrist, Dr. Osborn counted the pulse in silence. After that he asked, 'Sleep well last night?'

'I think not,' Myra replied. 'I dreamed a lot, but I kept waking up.'

'Mm-hmm. It's the heat.'

As he cast his eyes mechanically about the room, Myra cringed. She was too much of a snob to hope that this view of her humble apartment would not cause him to look down on her. But when he turned back, his expression had not changed.

'This heat's enough to make anybody feel run down.'

'It's not the heat!' Myra's voice rose to an explosive pitch that startled them both. She looked down at her fingers and continued in a more subdued tone. 'I admit I might feel better if I could get away to a decent climate.' Her hand fluttered out in a derisive gesture. 'As you can probably guess, there's not much chance of that.'

Dr. Osborn stirred slightly in his chair. Secretly he had no patience with these sorry women, but to the successful concealment of this attitude he owed a not inconsiderable portion of his income. 'Well, Mrs. Folger,' he said gravely, 'I guess we'd all like to get away sometimes.'

Putting her fingers along her forehead, Myra groaned. She was distressed to find him shifting the focus from herself to the rest of humanity. 'But what can you do about the way I feel?'

The doctor opened his bag. 'I think,' he advised as he brought out a small paper envelope, 'that if you get some sleep, you'll wake up to find that the world's improved considerably.'

Myra gasped. 'Are you trying to tell me all this is in my mind?'

Dr. Osborn did not know quite what to reply. This, needless to say, had been his diagnosis from the first. Repeated examinations had turned up nothing significant. Although he doubted that there was anything physically wrong with her, he realized that it would be futile to insist on this. 'It's not really so simple as that,' he replied, 'but a good sound nap certainly won't do you any harm.'

Myra felt her confidence in him wavering. She had regarded this as an extreme emergency and had expected the doctor, after one look at her, to summon an ambulance. In fact, it was a course she was rather looking forward to—a cool hospital bed, attentive nurses, meals brought in to her on a tray. It shocked her to hear him talking of aspirin and sleeping pills.

'I'm sure there are doctors in this city who'd feel they could do more for me than that.'

He closed his bag sharply. 'I can assure you, Mrs. Folger, that there's not a doctor in the world who could do anything for you that you don't want to do for yourself.'

As she listened to these words, her hand twisted the bed clothes in nervous indignation. It was a moment before she found her voice.

'You wouldn't be speaking to me like this if I were one of those rich women over on the West Side.'

Dr. Osborn struggled to show his suffering patient the tolerance and sympathy expected from a member of his profession. But as he gazed into Myra's haggard face, he was not altogether successful in containing his feeling of contempt. Within his limitations, he tried to make allowances for human frailties, but he was not that rarity, a genuinely humble person, and he knew it. Moreover, he held little optimism for remaking character. It was one of the reasons he was so generous with drugs. He preferred to humor people like Mrs. Folger, much as he would a terminal case, allowing them sedatives to ease their tender nerves and stimulants to get them over the blues. He set two envelopes on the small table beside the bed.

'Try to get some sleep, Mrs. Folger. These other tablets will take care of the headache. If you're not feeling any better tomorrow, make an appointment at my office and we'll give you a check-up.'

Turning her face to the window, Myra addressed him in a flat, indifferent manner, as if she were dismissing a servant. 'I won't be putting you out any more, Doctor.'

He sighed. 'As to that, you do just as you wish.'

'I intend to.'

The doctor bowed slightly then, and picking up his bag, silently left the room.

On the way out to his car, he met Mrs. Pettigrew, who had just come in carrying a sack of groceries. A look of concern came over her face as she recognized his bag.

'Mrs. Folger?' she asked.

He nodded.

‘Is there anything I can do?’

He glanced back toward his patient’s door. ‘In her case, I’m afraid there’s not much anyone can do.’

## 2

Whenever a particularly untidy guest moved out of the Castle Hill Hotel, Walter was called up from the basement to help clear out the room. Usually this work consisted of carrying out boxes of accumulated refuse, which he took down to the basement and burned. It was this task which awaited him after returning that morning from his walk. He was summoned by the manager and sent up to the third floor to assist the maid.

The maid was a scrawny little woman well past the age of retirement, except that there was no retirement plan at the Castle Hill. Like many persons who have never known anything but drudgery, she was, herself, a terror to work for. Whenever a new girl came to the hotel, she was always trained under Mrs. Drew. After the first week, the new employee had either accommodated herself to the old woman’s superhuman pace, or she quit. Either way, the management gained. To do her justice, Mrs. Drew never drove anyone harder than she did herself. Those who smarted under her tyranny grudgingly conceded this without perceiving how really meaningless the fact was. One might as well have said of an overly stern minister that he prayed harder than any of the congregation. For to Mrs. Drew, work, simple physical drudgery, was a kind of religion to which her life had been dedicated. What had instilled

this frenzied exaggeration of honest virtue no one could have surmised, least of all Walter.

The instant he appeared in the doorway, Mrs. Drew thrust a scrubbing brush into his hand. It was not legitimately in her province to do so, since Walter, being the furnace man, was considered to be exempt from such chores. But he was too docile to protest.

'The bathroom walls are filthy,' she announced with sour complacency. 'See that you don't leave any streaks.'

Obediently he set about doing what he was told. Dipping the brush into a bucket of gray suds, he began to scrub the turquoise tiled wall. Ordinarily this would have been a task almost perfectly suited to the higher limits of Walter's intelligence. Whereas lugging out boxes of trash demanded nothing more than brute muscle, scrubbing a wall, especially a very dirty wall, required a certain degree of perception and foresight. For one thing, it had to be scrubbed carefully from the top down, otherwise the dirty water trickled over a section already cleaned and the job had to be done all over again. In no sense could he have been called an efficient worker, since efficiency involves the factor of time. But when a chore was assigned to him, he was usually conscientious about seeing it completed.

Mrs. Drew was aware of this. And so she was righteously infuriated when she returned to find Walter listlessly scrubbing the same spot he had started on thirty minutes before. Fuming, she wrenched the brush from his hands.

'Go on out of here,' she ordered hotly. 'You're no good here. Go on out.'

Looking somewhat crushed, Walter turned and walked out of the room. He had gotten halfway down the hall when Mrs. Drew's shrill voice snapped the heavy silence of the corridor.

'If it ain't askin' too much, Walter, stop in at 407 and pick up the box of trash in there. But don't put yourself out.'

The door to 407 stood open. He stepped across the vacuum cleaner and went over to pick up the cardboard box. As he started to bend down, something on the dresser caught his eye—a vase of roses. Walter walked up to them, fascinated by their gaudy beauty. The petals were blood red and they were beaded with droplets of water, as if they had just been picked while the dew was still on them. Walter glanced back toward the door. For an instant his pale, liquid eyes contained a glint of craftiness. Taking a newspaper from the box, he wrapped it around the vase. In this way he carried the roses out into the hall and down the back stairs to his own room.

### 3

Myra Folger had a fitful nap. The humid air came in through the window and filled the room, surrounding the bed like a hot, smothering fog. Even in sleep, she revealed her natural modesty by keeping the moist sheet tucked tightly beneath her chin. Once she opened her eyes when she thought she heard someone moving in the room, and despite her drugged state, sleep did not return at once. In the twilight of semi-wakefulness, her mind embraced the bizarre fancy that a freak celestial



force had pulled the earth from its orbit, drawing it slowly into the sun. Nothing else could account for the merciless heat. Strangely, she found this certitude consoling. She dozed off again and she began to dream.

She was alone on an enormous stage. As the curtain rose, she could sense the people in the audience shifting forward slightly in their seats. She waited, for the tenderly ardent monologue would be marred if she had to raise her voice. Then the moment came. She was about to speak, when suddenly an invisible hand closed about her throat, slowly tightening, holding back the words. She struggled, but her assailant had no physical form. Then, as rapidly as it had struck, the hand relaxed and she was free to speak once more, only now the spotlight had shifted and she found herself in darkness. Across the stage, a young, beautiful girl began to deliver Myra's lines in a thin, sing-song tone . . .

A footstep in the room jarred her awake. She bolted up to a sitting position.

'What are you doing in my room?'

So startled was Mrs. Pettigrew, as the voice exploded in the quietness of the sickroom, that she nearly dropped the pitcher in her hand. Setting it down on the bed stand, she turned to Mrs. Folger with an uneasy smile.

'The doctor said you were quite ill,' she explained. 'I thought perhaps there was something I could do.'

'What's in that?' Myra demanded.

'Ice water. Would you like a glass?'

Mrs. Folger sank back on the pillow. She was sure that she must have a fever. She rubbed her hand across her clammy face and then examined her wet fingers as

if expecting to find there some clue to her physical condition.

'Yes,' she answered at length. 'I'll have a glass—if it's cold.'

As she sipped the ice water, Mrs. Folger's gaze did not once leave the younger woman. Above the rim of the glass her dark eyes studied Mrs. Pettigrew with ill-concealed suspicion, trying to ferret out the other's motives for being here. It was inconceivable that anyone could have so much gall. What she was looking for was some hint of triumphant scorn in the younger woman's manner. If this shameless little strumpet had come down here with the idea of flaunting her looks and desirableness and vitality, Myra was resolved that it would be the mistake of her life.

Under Mrs. Folger's speculative scrutiny Catherine seemed to flinch. Myra noted this with interest. Quite likely, she decided, the English girl was not so lost to conscience that she didn't suffer honestly after each affair. Perhaps she regarded this as her atonement. The sick woman's lips shaped themselves into a grim smile. Well, then, she would see to it that the girl paid. She reached out her hand to set the glass on the table, but midway her fingers slipped, and the glass shattered on the floor.

At once Catherine stooped down, and with trembling hands began to pick up the pieces, while Mrs. Folger looked on with the bored expression of a remote spectator. She took her nail file from the bed stand.

'You'll find a dust pan in the kitchen,' she advised  
Catherine gently.

Catherine got the dust pan, and after she had finished

cleaning up the mess, she removed the soaked table scarf. She glanced inquiringly at Mrs. Folger.

'I keep them in the top drawer there,' Myra said.

Obediently she opened the drawer and began rummaging through the stacks of linen. Already she regretted that she had come, even though she was aware that her services had not been offered altogether out of charity. The truth was that Mrs. Pettigrew was afraid. Alone in her apartment upstairs, she had repeatedly imagined she heard strange noises. Every footfall on the sidewalk below drew her with an unwholesome compulsion to the window. What she expected to find there she had no idea. Nevertheless, she was gripped by a disturbing uneasiness which was all the more unexplainable because of her normally serene disposition. She simply wanted to be near someone, and Mrs. Folger, in view of her illness, seemed the logical person to share her company.

Catherine was about to close the drawer when something caught her eye. In the corner, partially hidden by a pile of handkerchiefs, was a small bottle labeled POISON. It seemed an odd sort of thing to be keeping there. Stealing a glance at Myra, who was occupied with filing her nails, she picked it up and turned it over in her hand. Mrs. Folger had been doing things of late which made others in the neighborhood wonder if she was quite sane. Only last week a scissors grinder had come to the back door soliciting blades to sharpen, and she had given him a butcher knife. Sitting on the back porch, the old man had worked happily for half an hour, honing the blade until it resembled a narrow cutlass. It was possible his diligence had taken him too far

in whetting the knife to this strange form, but it hardly justified Myra's reaction. She'd taken one look at it and cried that she wouldn't have a thing like that in her house. When he insisted, she had slammed the door. In the end, he had disgustedly thrust the knife into the door frame, where it remained the rest of the day looking like a dagger that had missed its victim. That night one of the neighbors claimed she had seen Mrs. Folger take the knife from the door, walk quickly to the back fence, and hurl it with all her might. There were those who disputed this story, but it went the rounds of the neighborhood for days.

Mrs. Pettigrew had forgotten the mirror in front of her; too late, her hand darted back into the drawer. The sick woman's whining voice was like a fingernail up her back.

'What have you got there in your hand?'

Closing the drawer with an abrupt motion, Catherine swung around.

'Nothing, Mrs. Folger. I can't seem to find a table scarf.'

Very slowly Myra's nail file began to move again. She leveled on Mrs. Pettigrew such a malignant look of distrust that for a moment the latter had the eerie feeling that it sprang from something far deeper than mere suspicion of meddling.

'I'll get you another glass,' she stammered.

After Mrs. Pettigrew had left the room, Myra struggled to her feet. She crept over to the dresser and took the bottle from the drawer. Holding it clenched in her hand, she got back into bed. In Myra's eyes it was a rational measure of self-defense to withhold weapons

from those who hated you. As for the poison itself, she had not saved it for any specific purpose. Her husband had bought the bottle long ago to exterminate rats, and she had been unable to throw it away. Once in a while, when she had nothing else to do, she would take out the bottle and lift it up to the light. It filled her with an almost mystical exultancy to contemplate that a few drops of the liquid had the power to subdue instantaneously the slight force of life. It was as though, holding it in this way, she possessed this power herself.

In the bathroom, Catherine found a washcloth. She filled a pan with cool water and carried it into the bedroom. Clearing a place on the table, she set down the pan. Then she wrung out the washcloth and leaned over the bed.

'This should cool you off a bit,' she said cheerfully.

Disciplining her aversion, Myra submitted in peevish silence as Mrs. Pettigrew washed her face and neck with the soothing cloth. Although she loathed her own weakness in permitting this immoral woman to touch her, Myra was unable to forego the feeling of importance it gave her to order someone about. Not in years had anyone fussed over her so. She looked on with an expression of sardonic contempt as Catherine lifted up one arm and washed it with a long deft stroke.

'You do these things well,' she observed. 'Were you a servant girl in the old country?'

Catherine flushed. 'No, after the war I helped out a bit in the hospital. That's all.'

Myra waited until she was through and was wringing the cloth over the basin before remarking, 'No doubt they knew what they were up to, though I can't imagine

anyone in his right mind giving a young, single girl the job of bathing naked soldiers.'

Catherine stiffened. 'Oh, I had nothing to do with the soldiers. I worked in a civilian hospital near my home.'

The older woman's remarks left Mrs. Pettigrew puzzled. She was not stupid. She was aware of the sliver of malice that penetrated everything Mrs. Folger said. But as far as Catherine was concerned, it seemed so unprovoked that she could only attribute her chafing comments to the infuriating heat. She carried the pan of water into the kitchen and returned with an empty glass, which she filled ~~once~~ more with water from the pitcher.

'Do you play cards?' she asked brightly. 'It might help us forget the weather.'

Myra had not played cards in years, not, in fact, since the first year of her marriage when Mr. Folger had taught her to play cribbage. She recalled that at this time the game had come as a godsend, for it was not long after they had begun to live together that each realized that they had not a single interest in common. During the long evenings of that first year, they had sat for hours on end with the cribbage board between them murmuring, 'Go,' and 'Your point,' with formal politeness. It was only by accident, through the comments of a third party, that both husband and wife discovered that the other hated the game. It had been, so to speak, the end of the honeymoon.

And Mrs. Pettigrew wanted to know if she played cards! For some reason the suggestion found a hospitable spot within the borders of Myra's rather queer sense

of humor. She actually threw back her head and laughed.

'Why, honey, I'm practically the world's champion at cribbage.'

As it happened, Catherine, too, was familiar with the game. She found the cribbage board high on the closet shelf in a box filled with old photographs, a college year book, and an abridged script of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Myra won the first game by two dozen pegs, as much because of Mrs. Pettigrew's ineptness as her own skill. She played rapidly but with obvious boredom, tossing the cards down on the college annual which served as a playing table. Mrs. Pettigrew, on the other hand, examined her cards with a baffled intentness, as if she held some unfamiliar foreign currency.

'What time is it?' Myra asked impatiently.

Catherine looked at her watch. 'Twelve-thirty. Are you hungry?'

'In this weather? Good Lord, who could be hungry?'

'I am,' admitted Mrs. Pettigrew simply.

Myra appraised her for a moment with contemptuous amusement. 'I'll just bet you've never missed a meal or a night's sleep in your life, have you, dear?' Before the other could reply, she added softly, 'Are you going to play something on my jack?'

Catherine laid down a four. Myra topped it with an ace and casually racked up her points.

'You certainly play well,' said Mrs. Pettigrew with genuine admiration.

The older woman gave a short, bitter laugh. 'Yes, Myra beats them all at cribbage. That's what Myra does.'

She won the second game, and also the third. For a while she found it mildly entertaining to watch the little English girl going doggedly down to defeat. But before long she grew weary of the silly game. Irrational though it might have been in view of her uneventful existence, Mrs. Folger considered cards a waste of time.

'I've had enough,' she announced, pushing the cribbage board away. 'This water's lukewarm. Will you get some ice, please?'

Catherine brought in a tray of ice cubes and emptied it into the pitcher.

As she reached for her glass, Myra caught a glimpse of the two of them in the mirror. The contrast left her shaken. Next to the other's fresh youthfulness she looked like a pallid mummy. She bit painfully into her lips in hopes of brightening their color, but it only squeezed the blood farther from the surface, leaving them whiter than before.

'Draw the shade,' she commanded hoarsely.

Catherine pulled the shade to within a few inches from the sill. However, the diminished illumination favored Mrs. Folger not at all, and in fact deepened the pockets of shadow below her cheek bones. She sank back on the pillow, watching her companion in thoughtful silence. Myra was distressed by the limitations of expression forced on her by their peculiar relationship. She had every reason to hate this woman. But hating Mrs. Pettigrew, she was conscious of the intense fascination that anything held for her which provoked in her a strong emotion. Suddenly she reached out and touched Catherine's hair. The abruptness of the movement caused the younger woman to draw back, but when she



saw what Myra was up to, she relaxed and let her caress her hair with a slow stroke, softly, as if she were a dull, placid cat.

As her thin fingers sifted through the fine, chestnut hair, Myra smiled faintly. 'You are beautiful,' she murmured. 'Tell me, what's it like to know that when you walk down the street, everyone approves of you instantly for no other reason than your looks?'

Embarrassed, Catherine pulled away. Mrs. Folger had spoken casually. From her tone it might have seemed that she was only creating conversation. But there was a cynicism in the black eyes which followed Catherine as she resettled her chair a foot farther away and shook out her hair.

'I'm not beautiful,' she replied. 'Even my husband admits that.'

'Oh, but I'm sure other men must find you so.'

Catherine frowned. She was not comfortable in this room. She had come down here seeking the other woman's company, but now she could see that it had been a mistake to carry one's troubles to a sickroom. She stood up.

'I really must get some lunch now. Are you sure you won't have some soup or something?'

As she stood there awaiting the other's reply, the damp rayon dress clung to her legs.

In her mind Myra saw her as she had looked standing before the window, the firm, shapely body so starkly outlined against the dark interior. She felt a pang of regret that she had not tarried longer on the curb. To see was to possess, and to possess—to possess was to torment. Suddenly she wanted to do something brutal

to that too-perfect body. As though in obedience to an intelligent command, her frail hand reached out graspingly.

In the next instant it closed around the cold glass.

'I shouldn't think all that ice water would be good for you,' said Mrs. Pettigrew. 'Perhaps I should make some tea.'

The sick woman stared dumbly at the glass which had been mistakenly thrust into her hand. A tiny tablet of ice floated on the water, slowly diminished, then vanished and became indistinguishable from the liquid molecules that had defeated it. Myra sighed. It was, she believed, a facet of her poetic nature that she was always finding forlorn analogies in commonplace things.

'It's gone,' she said tonelessly. 'Isn't it curious that there can be death where there's never been life.'

'Let me fix you a nice bowl of soup,' Catherine suggested. 'A person really should take something warm, even in this kind of weather.'

Mrs. Folger did not appear to have heard her, and she slipped noiselessly out of the room.

When she returned carrying a bowl of tomato soup, she found Myra asleep. Her arms were slung high above her head, which made her look as if she had passed out in a drunken stupor. Catherine set down the bowl in the event she should waken before long. As she turned to go, she noticed a hard object protruding from under the pillow. She leaned over to pick it up. It was the bottle of poison.

Catherine looked back at the sleeping woman and shook her head. Something told her it would be a mistake, in Mrs. Folger's distraught condition, to leave the

bottle down here. You could never tell what a person like Myra might do.

Returning to her own apartment, Catherine ate a light lunch, and when she had finished, she washed the dishes. Then she went into the living-room. Seating herself in front of the fan, she lit a cigarette. Catherine didn't know what to make of a woman like Mrs. Folger. At home, whenever anyone was ill, it was considered virtually an obligation to do what you could. She had gone down to the sick woman's room with the intention of helping her in any way possible, but Mrs. Folger had acted as if she resented her presence. Catherine wondered what the doctor had meant when he had said that in Myra's case there was little anyone could do.

While she was pondering this, her gaze happened to move toward the narrow bookcase in the corner. She frowned, then gradually she turned pale. Her lips parted in silent terror. On top of the bookcase was a vase she had never seen before, and in the vase were a dozen red roses.

A shiver went through her as she stood up. She advanced toward the vase slowly. Rationally she knew that someone had been in the room while she was downstairs with Mrs. Folger. She hadn't locked the door, and even if she had, it could have been opened with a five-cent skeleton key. But from the cautious way she approached it, the vase might have been the instrument of some dark, supernatural being. For several seconds she did not touch it. Then, with a sudden resolve, she unfastened the screen and tossed the flowers, vase and all, out the window.

She ran to the telephone. Even after she had looked

up the number, her fingers were shaking so that she had trouble dialing it. Presently she heard a voice.

'Police headquarters. Sergeant Paine speaking.'

She could hardly get her breath. Her words came falteringly. 'I want to report someone . . .'

'What's that, ma'am?'

'I want to report someone to the police.'

'This is the police.'

'Yes.' She paused. 'A man has been loitering around the apartment house here since day before yesterday and . . .'

'Beg pardon, ma'am. Who's this speaking?'

'My name is Mrs. Charles Pettigrew.'

'Address?'

'I live——' Catherine faltered. Already she was beginning to doubt the wisdom of what she was doing. 'Could you arrest this man without my husband finding out about it? You can't mistake him if you see him. He's tall and he's wearing a bill cap.'

'Now look, lady,' he said impatiently. 'I don't know if we can arrest anybody yet. We've only got your word so far. What's this about your husband?'

Catherine was beginning to feel trapped. After all, she didn't really know who had been in the room. Perhaps there would be some dreadful publicity which her husband would read in the newspaper before she had a chance to explain it to him herself.

The voice sounded in her ear again. 'Look, Mrs. Pettigrew, what's your address?'

'I—never mind.'

She hung up and dropped into a chair, all her strength gone. If only Charles would hurry back! She

would tell him in her own words what had happened. He would understand then, and everything would be all right.

## 4

On Fridays, after his morning English class, Roy Oblonski did not have another class until late afternoon. Usually he spent the time loitering about the book stores or drinking coffee in one of the cafés that edged the campus. This was one of the few occasions when he purposely, intentionally wasted time. Sitting over a cup of coffee, he enjoyed watching the younger students who drifted in and out between classes, arguing stridently, or glancing about with self-conscious nonchalance. Although he was in no sense part of all this, Roy even absorbed a little of the end-of-the-week spirit which pervaded the campus. This Friday, however, was more or less exceptional in that he was hoping later in the afternoon to learn the result of his examination. After lunch he walked over to Boyles Hall, a building shared by the English and Foreign Language departments. He went directly up to Professor Woorley's office.

A chubby girl, who did odd jobs about the department, was sitting at the professor's desk. She did not acknowledge his entrance immediately, but continued poring over a yellowed manuscript. She was counting the entrances and exits of the characters in a recently discovered nineteenth-century play, and not enough people appreciated how exceedingly important such work was. After a minute she glanced up with a pre-occupied expression.

'Yes?'

'I just wondered,' said Roy apologetically, 'if you expected Dr. Woorley in soon.'

'No,' she replied, 'he won't be in at all today. Mr. Andreason is taking his classes. Dr. Woorley's had a slight accident.'

'Accident?'

'Just sprained his ankle. He expects to be around sometime next week in good shape. Don't look so worried.'

But Roy wasn't thinking about Dr. Woorley's ankle. 'Then I guess the exam grades for 413 won't be ready today.'

'Afraid not. He took the papers with him last night. Oh, by the way, what was the name?'

'Roy Oblonski.'

'Oh, yes, I have a message for you, Mr. Oblonski. Dr. Woorley said he would appreciate it if you could drop by his house this afternoon.'

Roy merely stared, suspecting there must have been some mistake.

She wrote something on a piece of paper. 'This is his address. It's only about a mile from here. You can take the Glenwood bus, or if you want to, you can walk it. Dr. Woorley usually does. I wouldn't be surprised if that's how he sprained his ankle.'

He took the paper, still slightly dazed by this totally unexpected event. 'Thank you for your trouble,' he murmured awkwardly, but he saw she wasn't listening.

Although Professor Woorley's house was hardly more than a mile from the main section of the city, it was bordered on one side by open fields. The city, stretching

north and south along the river, had not succumbed to westward pressure at this particular latitude. A few blocks farther south, the boundaries burst sharply and radically to the west. A wide boulevard jutted west from the bridge, serving as a firm spine for new additions, which had appeared cautiously at first, until the trend was established. Now isolated sections like Glenwood were completely out of it. This may have explained how Dr. Woorley could have occupied a rather spacious old house on a professor's salary.

After Roy had rung the bell, his hand shot up to smooth his moist hair. This was the first time he had ever been invited to a professor's house, and it seemed nothing short of momentous that the invitation should have been extended by the head of the department. He heard someone stirring inside the house. A moment later a young woman appeared at the screen door.

'Hello,' she said pleasantly, 'are you Mr. Oblonski by any chance?'

Roy admitted that he was.

She opened the door, and as he brushed past, he caught the faint, delicate scent of her perfume. He stood to one side while she fastened the hook. Then she led him into the living-room and offered him a chair.

'I'm Mrs. Woorley,' she announced as she slid onto the piano stool and twirled around to face him. 'Dr. Woorley will see you in a minute.'

Her voice had an intimate, musical quality that he liked. As a rule he was not comfortable in the presence of women, but her informality had the effect of making him feel welcome, and he was grateful for it.

'I understand Professor Woorley had a mishap.'

Mrs. Woorley smiled. 'Oh, nothing very serious, I guess, although you'd never have believed it if you'd heard him moaning last night.'

There was an almost self-conscious cuteness in her smile, but Roy found this unobjectionable. She was a very attractive young woman. She looked to be about his own age, although it was hard to tell. Her blonde hair was cut in bangs across her forehead, and her skin, even this early in the season, was a rich tan. Crossing her bare legs, she fanned the air pointlessly with her hand.

'Whew! I hope you didn't walk all the way up here in this heat.'

Roy started to say something in reply, but he noticed her gray eyes scrutinizing him in such a forthright way that he lost his train of thought. Fumblingly he offered her a cigarette without, however, taking one himself. Mrs. Woorley produced a flame from a lighter on the coffee table. As her pale green skirt worked its way above her knees, he looked carefully away. She was not at all the sort of person he had looked for Dr. Woorley's wife to be. The professor was nearly fifty, and although he was far from a dried-up academician, neither did he seem the type who'd have an active taste for beautiful women. Roy's imagination ran to comfortable clichés. He had rather expected a thin, fluttery little thing with lace at her wrists. He had thought they might share a bowl of white grapes in a darkened parlor while she talked in a hushed, reverent way about Keats.

When he turned back, he was startled to find her still staring at him with an embarrassingly open curiosity. It occurred to Roy that she must be taking stock of



him on the basis of some remark her husband had made. If so, had the remark been favorable?

Just then, Dr. Woorley put his head through the door. 'Hello there, Mr. Oblonski. Would you care to step in?'

Roy entered and closed the door behind him. The room had obviously not been intended for a study, because a swinging door on the other side led toward the rear of the house. But the passage had been blocked by a bookcase. As he hobbled over to his desk, the professor seemed already to have forgotten the student. He sat down and began opening drawers, poking into them one by one. He was a tall man in his late forties, quite spare, with a lean, intelligent face. Midway in the search, he turned to his guest.

'Have a seat,' he invited, indicating a chair next to the desk.

Roy obeyed in silence, and Dr. Woorley went on with what he was doing.

'Do you mind if I smoke?' Roy asked, holding up a pack of cigarettes.

'No, no. Go ahead.'

As he lit the cigarette, he glanced out the window. From this point he had a view of the yard, which was surprisingly well trimmed, considering the professor's negligent habits. Probably, Roy decided, this was Mrs. Woorley's domain. He watched two sparrows fighting over a morsel at the edge of the bird bath. The bath stood between a double row of peonies that ran parallel to the house. On a plane beyond this, the far edge of the lawn could be seen to fade into the boulevard. The scene was finished by a line of birch trees at the opposite

side, marking the end of the immediate view and the beginning of an open field which stretched like a green tapestry on the other side. At least in Roy's vision it did. He was rather near-sighted, and the row of birches was as far as he could penetrate with accuracy. The picture left him feeling rather mellow. He had a pleasurable premonition that at last he was on the verge of advancing into a happier role. This was more the way he had imagined college would be—spending an afternoon in his professor's study, perhaps even staying for dinner to discuss the modern novel over a rare roast. All that had gone before was groundwork. Laborious, it had to be admitted, but now that he was almost a graduate student, things would be different.

Apparently Dr. Woorley had found what he was looking for. When he swung around to face the student, he was holding a sheet of paper in his hand.

'Mr. Oblonski, I have here your application for graduate school. I see that it was filed some time ago. Have your plans changed any since then?'

'Oh no, sir,' he answered. 'That's why I intend to go to summer session. I want to be able to start graduate work in the fall.'

'Why?'

Roy frowned. The question, put so tersely, left him puzzled.

Dr. Woorley laid the application aside and picked up his pipe.

'How old are you, Mr. Oblonski?'

'Twenty-eight.'

'What did you do after you got out of the army—I mean before you decided to come to college?'

'I worked in a grocery store for a while.'

'I take it you didn't care for that.'

'Not much.'

The professor paused to dig something from his pipe. He struck the bowl against his palm as he remarked. 'Never get into the pipe habit. They're more bother than they're worth.' In the same tone he added, 'Why do you want to teach English?'

Roy felt the question demanded an eloquent answer, and it was frustrating that, despite his expansiveness, he could not summon one on such brief notice. 'I think,' he replied somewhat apologetically, 'that it's a very good way to make a living.'

'Oh, come now. Don't you really think you could make more money in real estate?'

Roy was shocked that the great Dr. Woorley should utter such a statement. He was only joking, of course. The professor's contempt for commerce had seeded many of his choicest epigrams. He decided to lean on this.

'Happiness doesn't come simply from making money,' he said pontifically. 'One must have a goal.'

Dr. Woorley closed his eyes. It obviously irritated him to hear his own remarks expressed in such elementary terms. Having given up on the pipe, he tossed it into a drawer.

'And what is this goal you're seeking, Mr. Oblonski?'

Leaning back in his chair, the student raised his head pensively to the ceiling. It was doubtless not his fault that he looked less like a thinker marshalling logic than a little boy watching a fly. This, thought Roy, is fine conversation. 'Actually, I guess it's not the goal so much

as working toward it that counts. Nobody can find complete happiness anyway.'

'Yes, yes,' said the other impatiently. 'So homely philosophy tells us. You must have other reasons.'

Roy scratched his chin thoughtfully. He could find no way to express his lukewarm interest in literature which would not sound insincere.

'About this application,' Dr. Woorley went on in a matter-of-fact tone. 'I may as well tell you that too many have applied already—more than we can possibly accept.'

The student pivoted slightly in his chair. Although he was conscious of no particular emotion, some warning signal flashed through his body, stiffening him as if for an imminent explosion.

The professor continued. 'It's up to me as head of the department to weed out the least likely candidates before submitting the list to the Dean.'

As he paused, Roy recognized a thin sheaf of papers in his hand—the examination.

'I want you to be truthful with me, Mr. Oblonski. Did you prepare for this test?'

Roy nodded feebly, his tongue too paralyzed to cope with anything so formidable as a word. Inverted for his eyes, but too plain to be mistaken, was the red letter 'F.'

'This exam.' Professor Woorley shook his head in despair. 'I admit I deliberately marked it low. For anyone but an English major, it might have rated a "D." But good Lord, man, half the time you didn't even seem to understand what I was asking!' He laid the papers on the pile, straightening it with unnecessary

meticulousness. 'It so happens we've had a number of top students applying for graduate school this year.'

In the pause that followed, Roy knew he was a doomed man.

'I feel I should be blunt with you, Mr. Oblonski, so as not to waste any more of your time. I can't recommend you for graduate work.'

Roy's tongue flicked across his dry lips, but otherwise his expression was unchanged. There was an unreality about the scene not unlike a dream. He could see, hear, but some skeptical voice that was part of him whispered that it could not be. Who could stop breathing simply because he was ordered to?

The voice droned blandly on, but in a changed tone, extending now the humiliating cruelty of commiseration.

'It's just unfortunate that the competition should be so keen this year. Of course, I'd like to be able to recommend all of you, but——'

'I understand, Dr. Woorley.' Somehow Roy had got to his feet. Without another word, he moved through the door, pushed past Mrs. Woorley, whose abortive smile died on her lips, and out into the sunshine.

He walked in a semi-trance, unaware of the objects that loomed around him, too bewildered yet for despondency. He was like a man caught, tried, and sentenced to be executed before he'd had time to comprehend his crime. Up ahead, a shimmering wave rose from the pavement. As he walked, reality, which had been jarred askew, began to settle slowly back into place. He crossed a vacant lot, and when he was on the other side, he stopped to take a pebble out of his

shoe. Leaning against a small tree, he carefully retied the lace. He looked at his watch. Three-fifteen. It was a long way home.

## 5

Myra Folger sat up and wiped her perspiring face with a corner of the damp sheet. Was it a nightmare or was it real? She decided she must have been dreaming. However, she couldn't be sure, for everything—the room, the heat, even the touch of her own hand against her cheek—had an unsubstantial quality, no less so than the vision of Catherine Pettigrew sitting at the foot of the bed, smiling, smiling, ending the silence only to remark softly: 'I've come to watch you die.'

In spite of the heat, Myra shivered. She knew she must be very ill. The headache had returned with redoubled ferocity—that alone was unquestionably real. She moaned as she pressed her finger tips against her forehead. Was it true that some people were made only for suffering? She started to reach for the box of aspirin, and then her hand paused in mid-air. An odd sensation crawled up the back of her neck as she stared at the unfamiliar bowl on the bed stand. Then Mrs. Pettigrew *had* come back into the room. Was it possible she hadn't been dreaming after all? More than possible. Suddenly Myra swung around and struck out wildly with her open hand. But even before she knocked the pillow to the floor, something told her the bottle of poison would be gone.

Springing from the bed, she snatched up the bowl

and carried it into the bathroom where she dumped its contents into the toilet. After this one positive act, poor Mrs. Folger seemed to have quite gone out of her mind. She fluttered about the apartment like a bird trying to rediscover an open window. With shaking fingers she lit three cigarettes one after the other, and forgot them the instant she laid them down. Once she went into the bedroom and started to pack a bag, but before she was half done, she forgot that too.

She began to pace up and down the living-room, her rayon house coat billowing out behind her gaunt frame. The normal everyday irritations which supplied her chronic discontent were fully as much as she could cope with. Now this sudden menace to her life, imaginary though it was, threatened to overwhelm her completely. A series of hoarse sobs escaped her throat, but apparently gave her no physical relief, for her movements continued as nervously aimless as before. Only when a door slammed upstairs did she pause, still as ice.

Through the curtain she watched Catherine Pettigrew descend the front steps and cross the street toward the grocery store. The fact that she could watch her adversary without herself being seen seemed to have a calming effect on Myra, at least temporarily. She continued for some time at this post, and only began to grow uneasy again when the English girl did not come out. So intent was she in watching the door across the street that she didn't even notice a tall figure come around the corner of the building and stoop down to pick up something from the sidewalk.

Walter gathered the hot, wilted roses one by one. As he did so, he inspected them with a look of puzzled

sadness in the same way a little boy might have lifted up the body of a fond pet that had died during the night. After he had collected them all, he stood for a moment looking up at Mrs. Pettigrew's window. Even Walter could see that this was plainly not an accident. She had done it on purpose. She had opened the screen and deliberately destroyed the flowers. Walter shook his head. He did not understand this at all. Turning away, he began to walk slowly back toward the hotel.

## 6

By the time he arrived at the house, Roy looked as if he had been caught in a downpour. His shirt was saturated with sweat, and his meticulously knotted tie, pulled loose at the throat, hung in a bedraggled loop. The instant he closed the door, he was conscious of an echoing click farther down the hall. He had not quite reached the stairs when from the edge of his eye he noticed Myra Folger's door open slowly.

Roy was aghast at what he saw. Evidently she was not dressed. The disembodied head which hung through the narrow opening was so drawn and peaked it reminded him of a sick fowl peering out dolefully from its crate. He was relieved when this lugubrious effect was not made even more hideous by the mockery of her customary grin.

'Mr. Oblonski,' she said in an anxious whisper, 'may I speak to you for a minute. It's important.'

He turned very deliberately and scrutinized her for a moment with calm malevolence. 'Mrs. Folger, from now on, you keep out of my way.'



'Oh, Mr. Oblonski, please!'

He moved on hurriedly, as though fearful she might reach out and clutch him with one of her spidery hands. At the turn in the stairs, he glanced back. She was still standing there, her eyes following him in anguished disbelief.

In his room Roy began to collect his books. They were no good to him now. When he had got them all together, he found that there were exactly two dozen. The whole lot might bring fifteen or twenty dollars. He looked about for a piece of cord, and when he found none, decided to pile them into his suitcase. But no matter how he packed them, he had several books left over, and the largest ones at that. Wiping his damp palms on his trousers, he went to work unpacking again. But suddenly he paused. In his mind's eye he got a glimpse of how ridiculous he must look, squatting there in that hot miserable room—he, Roy Oblonski, twenty-eight years old, fretting like an old woman among her pots and pans. Straightening up, he advanced to the mirror which hung over the sink. He had never given much attention to his looks before, but the face which gazed back at him now seemed despicably weak.

'You disgust me,' he said contemptuously.

Then he stepped over the pile of books and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Seated alone at the bar, Roy stared glumly at the glass in his hand. When a general sees his campaign go amiss, he is supposed to be prepared with an alternative course. Roy had none. He was as ill-equipped for total failure as he would have been for spectacular success.

And this was the injustice of it. He put down the empty jigger and reached quickly for the glass of water. His life-plan had been rather modest. He had done what he was told and he had done it thoroughly. It wasn't fair. A man who tries to move mountains can expect to pick himself up one day at the bottom, bleeding and crushed. But Roy had only aimed at being an English instructor in a small middle-western college at thirty-five hundred a year. What alternative could one find for so moderate a victory that wouldn't be an outright defeat?

He ordered another shot of whiskey. As soon as it arrived, he tossed it down and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. Superficially, it was the gesture of a hard drinker, but some subtle violation in the act gave him away. From a short distance the bartender watched him with an interested expression. Roy extended the empty glass and signaled for it to be refilled. Much as he had come to detest the monotonous grind of studies, he had known precisely what tomorrow would bring. This was as necessary to Roy as variety and excitement were to many others. What could he do now? Desolate visions of inadequate meals and naps on a park bench marched across his mind. His fingers tightened around the glass.

Strangely, he heard the noise before he actually felt the pain. For an instant he thought someone had thrown something against the bar. Then he held up the bleeding hand with which he had crushed the fragile glass.

The bartender moved in swiftly with the belligerent expression of a nettled traffic cop. He slapped both hands flatly on the bar, apparently with the intention

of vaulting over. But he must have realized how absurd he would have looked, heaving his muscular bulk into the air in that quiet, empty room. It was an exhibition of prowess and agility which every bartender loved to display, but this just wasn't the occasion for it. Picking up a rag, he methodically began to brush the pieces into a bucket.

'Okay, bud,' he said, nodding curtly toward the door. 'You've had your limit here. Take the tragic act somewhere else.'

Roy sucked contritely at his injured hand. The accident had been as much a surprise to him as to the other, and considerably more painful. He was still sitting there, a little puzzled by what had happened, when the bartender returned from the back room.

As he saw Roy, his face became tinged with a rising anger, aggravated, perhaps, by the earlier frustration of his acrobatics.

'What are you waiting for, bud? I said beat it.'

At this point a new figure loomed up from somewhere.

'What's the matter with you, Al? Can't you see he's cut his hand?'

Ignoring the third party, Al planted himself menacingly in front of Roy.

The intruder, however, refused to be left out of it. 'What's your trouble, you big egg? Are you trying to let on this is the first time anybody ever broke a glass in your joint?'

The bartender's face became grave in a way which seemed to signify that consistency in logic was an important thing with him.

'He did it deliberately, Marian.'

'All right, he likes to bust glasses the way you like to bust heads. Now go get a band-aid.'

In the face of such incisive reasoning, he turned and lumbered sullenly toward the rear of the bar, while Marian installed herself in the seat beside Roy. She was probably well over forty, and in the most ideal circumstances might have claimed thirty-five. Such conditions were presented by the illumination of the bar. Here it was just possible to believe that the ruddy glow in her cheek was genuine.

'Don't pay any attention to Al,' she advised warmly. 'He's too stupid to know what troubles are.'

By the time the bartender returned with the bandage, Roy already had a handkerchief wrapped around his bleeding hand. He tried to get a stealthy glimpse of the woman in the mirror, but her eyes were there to meet him. As her smile widened, he looked away.

However, she continued to pick her way with blithe unconcern through his defense of aloofness. 'I'm pretty good at reading people's minds. I could tell something was eating you even before you broke the glass.' She gestured contemptuously toward Al, who had retreated to the other end of the bar. 'He's got no business being a bartender. He's got as much sympathy as a mule.'

A spot of blood seeped through the handkerchief, and Roy covered it with an extra turn, drawing the end tight in hopes it would stop the bleeding.

She leaned over, touching his shoulder lightly.

'Money troubles this time, or just a woman?'

Glancing up, Roy encountered her eyes once more in the mirror. She was appraising him with such a

hackneyed mask of shrewdness he felt embarrassed for her. He jerked his arm roughly away. This was not the first time he had encountered female barflies who gave psychiatric advice for the price of a drink. What else did they have to offer? Love? If they'd had love to give, he had long ago decided, most of them wouldn't have landed in these joints in the first place. He stared ruefully at the circle of blood on the handkerchief, all that remained of his small aggression. When the bartender showed no inclination to serve him again, he got down from the stool and walked unsteadily toward the door.

For the first second he was nearly struck blind. The dazzling whiteness presented itself without a break. But very quickly, flaws appeared; shadows developed. A moving object in front of him assembled into a human figure. When the man stopped for a paper, Roy heard the newsboy remark that it was a hundred and one. Roy drifted north along Sixteenth, he didn't much care where. He was moving out of the better district now, toward the fringe of that other part of town where he himself lived. Here were the small shoddy stores dealing in novelties and surplus army goods and second-hand furniture. He did not consciously seek out the next bar; it was a place on the corner with double doors—a wide, cavernous mouth, which opened a little wider and drew him in.

It wasn't air conditioned, but Roy did not mind. He was beyond caring about something so trivial as the heat. He ordered a double shot, and drank it down at once.

'Fightin' fire with fire, eh?'

Roy turned to find himself being addressed by a fat, red-faced man wearing a soiled straw hat.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Only way to beat the heat, I say. A man's a fool to stay sober in weather like this. Right?'

Roy nodded and turned away. The heat, the heat. That's all people could talk about. It dominated their lives, routing them like beaten troops into the country, or driving them into bars. What was the heat to him now, when his career, his life, had come up against a stone wall? He inspected himself grimly in the mirror. And why? Because he'd let himself be carried away by a cheap little trollop who didn't even have the decency to carry on her affairs in private. No telling what she'd done to other men, but as for him, she'd ruined his life. Roy's foot slipped on the bar rail and he nearly fell off the stool, but he caught himself in time. That's what she'd done, he announced dramatically, ruined his life.

As he thought about it, the conviction began to lodge itself in his mind that he could not tranquilly endure such a humiliation, and still be a man. There was something he could do, would do. He wasn't the sort just anybody could make a fool of—not Roy Oblonski. By way of sealing his resolution, he ordered another drink.

## 7

To his jubilant surprise, David Weeks had received thirty-five dollars for his stamp collection. Although this was no more than half its value, it was nearly twice what he had really expected. In high spirits over his

new wealth, he went looking for his Uncle Hubert who had failed to return home last night. Shortly before dark the search took him to the Public Library where, unknown to Mr. Willoughby, David had once discovered him napping in the periodical room, which was something of a private club for floaters and pensioners. It was here that David found him this evening. He sat hunched over a table with his hand guarding his eyes. A loose thread from the cuff of his shirt played across his knuckles as he dozed, awakened, and dozed again. When his nephew touched him on the shoulder, he jerked up. He swung around groggily.

'Oh! How are you, my boy?'

'Okay. But you don't look in such good shape yourself, Uncle Hubert.'

The statement suffered from an excess of tact. Lack of sleep as well as the dispiriting nature of his uncertain state had left Mr. Willoughby red-eyed and haggard. He had not dared return yesterday to his nephew's apartment on Trenton Street for fear of being seen. So he had passed the night in an establishment bereft of order, cleanliness, privacy, or, indeed, any of the amenities which give to the human being the comfortable illusion of dignity. Mr. Willoughby had spent the night in a flophouse. He had awakened, or rather he had sleeplessly risen from the dirty mattress, in a desolate mood. And nothing had happened since then to change his condition.

Rubbing his eyes with a grimy hand, he looked about him with the harried expression of a man who has obstinately refused to accustom himself to a life-long chain of defeats. Like nearly all persons who elect to

live precariously, Mr. Willoughby was an optimist. However, his optimism required the support of certain indispensable luxuries. Given good clothes, a well-mixed drink, a comfortable chair, a decent view, there was little that could shake his repose. But as his gaze swung from the half-dozen sleeping derelicts back to his own rumpled clothes, he came disturbingly close to recognizing himself for what he was. And in Mr. Willoughby's case, this could be a perilous thing to do. Fortunately, such infrequent eruptions of insight were subdued by the more powerful instinct of self-preservation. He was down on his luck, that was all, and no power in the world was going to prevent him from vaulting back into that society in which he belonged.

It occurred to him that the periodical room was a strange place to encounter his nephew.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded.

'I just sold my stamp collection,' the youth replied. 'Let's go out to dinner.'

Mr. Willoughby looked at the clock. He planned to call on Mrs. Pettigrew within an hour, a prospect which brought a sickening flutter to his empty stomach every time he thought about it. On a full meal his confidence was bound to increase.

'I really need a shave first.'

'Not where I'm going. Come on.'

As a concession to Mr. Willoughby's appearance, they dined in a cellar café where a candle stuck in the neck of a wine bottle was all that illuminated the table. The meal was characterized by a marked one-sidedness in the conversation until David happened to stumble onto a subject which jarred the other out of his lethargy.



'Have you seen the English girl I was telling you about?'

His uncle's steak-laden fork paused in its journey and retreated back to his plate. 'What do you mean by that?' he demanded.

'I mean have you seen her?' David did not believe he could put it any plainer than that. He decided the old boy must be even more fatigued than he looked. 'You're missing something if you haven't. She's quite a dish.'

Mr. Willoughby calmly resumed his meal. 'I assure you,' he announced with frosty self-righteousness, 'I have better things to occupy my mind.'

'Maybe so, but it's different with me.' He glanced both ways as he lowered his voice. 'Look, Uncle Hubert, I wouldn't admit this to anybody else in the world, but the truth is I've never had a woman yet.'

His uncle absorbed this inglorious confession without the remotest display of astonishment.

David scowled. It was rather galling to watch the person to whom you'd just exposed your soul casually butter a bit of roll and serenely put it in his mouth. He might at least have affected interest, if not sympathy.

'The only reason I brought it up,' the youth added lamely, 'is that I'm expecting a change.'

'That so?' Uncle Hubert inquired in a bored tone. 'When?'

'Tonight. You see, I met Mrs. Pettigrew in the park yesterday. I don't think it's much of an exaggeration to say that we came to an understanding.'

Mr. Willoughby was suddenly interested. He leaned forward, and the candlelight, illuminating his unshaven

face from below, lent a hint of depravity to his features. 'What's this about tonight?'

'Oh, no definite agreement.' David indulged in a cynical smile. 'I just thought I'd pay a little visit.'

The older man looked vaguely disturbed. 'What about your studies? My boy, this is no time to be letting things slide. Have you thought of that?'

The youth was crestfallen. It had given him a twinge of wicked complicity to confide his scheme man to man, and his uncle was the last person he would have expected to deliver so prosaic an objection. David tried to find a plausible way to turn the discussion back to Mrs. Pettigrew, but the reference to studies had the curiously dampening effect of a Biblical quotation.

Uncle Hubert seemed determined to prolong his unwelcome thesis. 'Didn't you tell me just last week that if you got high enough grades you might win a scholarship in journalism?'

'Oh that!' he said disdainfully. This declaration had come at one of those points when the problem, which chronically revolved in his mind, stood momentarily at rest. David had never been able to decide which he wanted to be—the man who rushes off repairing, damaging, and changing the world, or the one who gets his laughs from watching others thus waste their energies. At the moment, it was of no consequence.

All during the meal David's bobbing wrist-watch had drawn frequent, furtive glances from Mr. Willoughby. But the inadequate light made the effort hopeless. At last he was forced to ask for the time.

'Ten after eight,' David announced, holding his arm to the flame. 'You in a hurry or something?'

‘As a matter of fact, I should make a phone call.’ Tabling his napkin, he pushed back his chair, but instead of rising, he perched there with an awkward hesitancy. ‘I don’t believe I have a coin. Do you suppose——’

‘Of course.’

By the time he had returned, Mr. Willoughby’s unprecedented concern over his nephew’s education had subsided. Something of more pressing interest had taken its place, something which obviously did not pertain to his young dinner companion at all. He had bought a newspaper, but it was merely for the purpose of making change. Only after they had finished the meal and were smoking and drinking coffee did he bother to shake it open and give the headlines a swift inspection.

‘Anything new on the border trouble?’ David asked.

As he refolded the paper, Mr. Willoughby’s expression grew melancholy. ‘Does it really matter?’

David took up the other’s gloomy remark enthusiastically. There was something undeniably pleasurable about embracing pessimism on a full stomach, when there was no danger of being tainted by it.

‘Nothing matters,’ he said grimly. ‘With the way things are going, we’ll all be dead soon anyway.’

And in that somber room, where a dozen quivering candle flames nervously assaulted the darkness, David was sure his words sounded ominously profound.

## 8

Darkness did not establish itself rapidly over the sweltering city. Long after the sun had withdrawn from

the narrow canyon of Trenton Street, it continued to illumine the peaks of the taller buildings downtown. But even here the brilliance had given way to the softened glow of twilight. Standing by her window, Catherine Pettigrew watched the methodical approach of nightfall with a gathering uneasiness.

The telephone rang.

She recognized his voice at once. His tone was anxious and peremptory. She must meet him, he said, at a certain drugstore downtown in half an hour. He would wait for her no longer than that. Before she'd gotten a chance to explain that she had no money, he hung up.

Catherine cradled the phone and looked at her watch. Now she wasn't sure what to do. She had nothing to gain by meeting the man. Picking up the letter which she had received from her husband that morning, she reread it in the waning light. She no longer dreaded having her husband find out what had happened on Wednesday afternoon—so long as he heard it from her own lips. When the man had called yesterday, she had temporarily lost her balance; nothing like that had ever happened to her before. But she could see now how preposterous it was, and she was even slightly ashamed that she'd had so little faith in her husband's trust.

At the same time, she disliked leaving the matter unresolved. A man desperate enough to attempt the criminal offense of extortion on such flimsy grounds might do some other unpredictable thing. This was why she'd intended to tell him that if he showed his face again she would see to it he was collared by the police.

It was a point she still desired to make known to him. Catherine glanced toward the window. If she hurried, she could make it downtown before darkness closed down completely.

Hubert Willoughby, his fingers nervously twisting the loose thread on his cuff, stood behind a parked car across the street from the drugstore. He was not really fool enough to take the risk of waiting for her inside in the event she failed to come alone. Here, except for his motionlessness, he was indistinguishable from the jostling crowd that pushed around him. But this fact brought him negligible comfort. Gazing down at the scuffed shoes below his wrinkled trousers, he shook his head in a silent little gesture of despair. This was hardly the place, certainly not the occasion, for a man in his position to be making penitent proclamations about his past sins, and Mr. Willoughby, true to form, was making none. He was not really an evil man, but the disturbing thing was that lately he'd found it necessary to keep reminding himself of this. It was not a matter that had troubled him at thirty, nor at forty. One lived, that was enough. And in his time Mr. Willoughby had lived well. Last night, while lying starkly awake among two dozen snoring vagrants, he had bitterly impugned the course of events which had made it necessary for him to hold such an abject threat over Mrs. Pettigrew's head. Mr. Willoughby's sense of honor may have been unorthodox, but he knew that blackmail was not his game. Unfortunately, he had no choice.

Mrs. Pettigrew was yet a block away when he first caught sight of her. She was walking briskly and she

was alone. Near the corner a flashing neon in the drugstore window assailed the hardened citizens with dire advice about their intestines. When she drew even with this, Mr. Willoughby stepped out. As he crossed the street, he drew in a great lungful of air, a measure that usually calmed him in such transitional circumstances.

‘Good evening, Mrs. Pettigrew.’

Touching her elbow, he swung her around gently. ‘Shall we walk?’ he suggested. ‘I much prefer the open air.’

Mrs. Pettigrew balked at his touch, and in the instant’s hesitation that followed, he noticed that she appraised him with disconcerting coolness. The way she did it provoked the uncomfortable idea that she was deliberately memorizing his features.

‘I guess it doesn’t matter where we go,’ he said.

‘No, it doesn’t,’ she agreed, ‘since we have nothing to talk about anyway.’

As she said this, he felt an odd, prickling sensation at the back of his neck. ‘Oh, come now. Nothing?’

‘I have no money for you,’ said Mrs. Pettigrew curtly. ‘I can’t believe there’s any other subject you’d care to discuss.’

Mr. Willoughby looked away. One had to strain now to make out the skyline. At this time of the day, in the last minutes before total darkness, the city was at its best. All the untidy vestiges of its daily existence were obliterated now, and very soon it would cease to be a visible entity at all. He breathed deeply again. He must not, he warned himself, lose his composure now.

‘My dear, I can’t believe you’ve really tried.’

'Of course I haven't tried,' she answered with unexpected vehemence. 'Why should I? I've done nothing wrong.'

'People aren't going to believe that, you know.'

'The police will. I know you. You can go to prison for blackmail.'

A muscle in his face twitched, and his hand automatically shot up to his cheek. He gave a dry little laugh, but it was too late. It didn't quite come off, and he knew it. With that, his brief performance was ended. His step slowed. As they came to an alley, he slipped in behind a parked truck and disappeared.

## 9

Instinctively, Hubert Willoughby had obeyed the impulse to get away from danger. However, once he had gained the temporary safety of the dark alley, his mind began to function more rationally again. He knew he did not dare leave things as they stood. Although there was undeniably a risk in showing himself once more on Trenton Street, the risk was greater if he did not. What had she meant by the words, '*I know you?*' Was it just a way of saying *I know your type*? .. had she actually seen him coming out of his nephew's apartment house?

Mr. Willoughby had known defeat before, many times, and he had learned to take failure, if not with good humor, then at least with outward poise. However, this threatened to develop into something genuinely calamitous, and this time he didn't even have the money to get out of town. As he reflected on his

position, his despondency deepened. The world was not kind to men of his age. To put the truth bluntly, he was a vagrant and he had attempted blackmail. What charity could he expect from the police? Police—the word made him shudder. Never in his long, crooked life had he spent so much as a single day in jail. He knew that at his age it would be a disaster he might not survive. Once a man lost his dignity, what else was left?

He did not hurry, for the caution which held him back was nearly as strong as the desperation which drove him on. For once he did not even have any very clear idea of what he intended to do. Humiliating though it would be, he might even throw himself on her mercy—an old man with an ailing heart. And if that didn't work——? Mr. Willoughby took a deep breath and quickened his step. Well, in the end a man could not abandon himself. He would do whatever was necessary for survival.

Before the house on Trenton Street, he paused. Partly as an excuse to postpone his entry, he took a handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped his perspiring face. At last he climbed the steps which led to the street door. Fortunately, it was not locked. He would have hated to ring. Once inside, he walked rapidly toward the stairs, but before he got that far, he was slowed by the sound of a door opening nearby. Mr. Willoughby halted as he found himself gazing at one of the strangest-looking creatures he had ever seen in his life.

Anyone who had viewed Myra earlier in the day would have been astonished at the sight of her now. She was wearing an ankle-length yellow chiffon dress,



the kind girls used to wear to garden parties and high school graduations. Her hair, which she normally combed straight back, had been brushed forward and meticulously arranged in a row of spit curls over her forehead. As if this were not ludicrous enough, she had plucked her eyebrows down to a thin line and rouged two scarlet spots on her pale cheeks.

‘Are you the man from the depot?’

As Mr. Willoughby hesitated, two considerations shaped his thinking. In the first place, he did not care to be seen going up to Mrs. Pettigrew’s apartment. The second was more material and had to do with the possible value of the luggage.

‘Yes, indeed. Are the bags ready to go?’

‘Come in.’ She stood to one side, permitting him to enter. Then she closed the door and leaned against it for a moment, appraising him with interest.

‘My, you look hot. Just sit down and make yourself comfortable,’ she invited. ‘I’ll get you a glass of cold lemonade.’

Reluctantly Mr. Willoughby sank onto the sofa. Weary though he was, this wasn’t quite what he’d had in mind. Perhaps he’d misunderstood.

Myra returned from the kitchen with two glasses of lemonade on a tray which she set on the coffee table. Flouncing out her skirt, she sat down beside her bewildered guest. She seemed to have already forgotten why he was there.

‘You know, I seldom have company any more,’ she confided.

He glanced at his watch with a frown. ‘Really, I must——’

'Oh!' Myra wrinkled her nose as she tasted the lemonade. 'I'm sorry about this. It's the maid's day off and I've just never been much good in the kitchen.'

'The maid?' He made no attempt to conceal his surprise.

'I have to let her off a great deal. She steals from me so.'

By habit he gazed about him more carefully now. To Mr. Willoughby's alert mind, a maid meant one thing—money. These quarters were anything but elegant. Still, it was possible that natural frugality, rather than poverty, governed her mode of living. When he turned back, he found the woman smiling at him, her head tilted a little to one side. This attempt at vivacity was so grotesque he felt compelled to lower his eyes.

'Why, you're not drinking your lemonade,' she exclaimed. 'I'll bet you'd like something stronger.'

Before he could protest, she scurried off toward the kitchen once more. She reappeared after a minute, carrying a glass.

'This is the best I could do. It's just cooking wine and it's warm, but it's better than nothing.'

'Thank you. It's fine,' he murmured, more perplexed than ever.

'There, now.' She sat down. 'We can have a long talk together, can't we?'

He hardly knew what to say. The woman's behavior was at least as odd as her appearance. 'You're leaving on vacation?' he asked politely.

'Leaving? Oh, yes. Yes, I shall be going away for the summer. It'll be pleasant to get away from the heat.' She sighed. 'But it's so lonely traveling by oneself.'

Mr. Willoughby took a prolonged drink from the glass. It was precisely what anyone would have done if he wanted to conceal an expression of rising excitement. When he spoke, his tone was suspiciously indifferent.

‘Are you going far?’

‘Oh dear, I thought I might go to the mountains. I don’t know.’ Her frail hand darted down to retrieve her silk handkerchief. With this she delicately touched her brow. ‘A lady traveling alone has to be so careful.’

Mr. Willoughby swallowed. It appeared to cost him an agony of self-denial to keep from rushing in too greedily. ‘Indeed she does,’ he agreed, and when he felt she was not looking, hastily slipped his tie up into place. Although he was unhappily conscious of needing a shave, he could be thankful the room was not brightly lighted. ‘Especially an attractive lady.’

Poor Myra was so thrilled by this preposterous remark that she actually began to giggle. He considered it fortunate that she was so homely. Homely women, having plodded through life on a short ration of flattery, were particularly responsive to the type of compliment Mr. Willoughby liked to give.

‘You’ll no doubt have your share of trouble with men who don’t know how to behave like gentlemen.’

Tilting her head, she looked at him roguishly again, and this time, for some reason, he found it less embarrassing.

‘Oh, not so much as I used to. You know, I was thirty on my last birthday.’

He nodded with, he hoped, convincing solemnity. He was certainly no stickler for truth where it interfered with sociable deception. Nevertheless, for artistic

reasons, if nothing else, he liked to see a lie kept within the bounds of plausibility, especially inasmuch as it might presently fall upon him to promote the fiction with his own remarks.

'Personally,' he offered, 'I've never found anything on Cape Cod to offend a refined lady.'

'Cape Cod. Cape Cod. You know, I've never been there.'

'Really? There's nothing like it. The days are quiet and the evenings are cool.' Recalling the photographs he had seen, he let himself be carried away. 'There's nothing quite so restful as to stroll the shore along the Cape and watch the ocean rolling in at your feet, and overhead the sea gulls circling the lighthouse.' He noticed that she had closed her eyes. Was she bored?

Suddenly she opened them again. 'Do go on,' she commanded. 'I believe you shall make me change my mind. If only it weren't such a nuisance getting accommodations.'

Mr. Willoughby tapped the glass with his forefinger while he waited for a seemly interval of silence. 'Fortunately,' he said at last, 'that shouldn't be any great problem. The fact is, I plan to vacation there myself. If it would relieve your mind, I'd be happy to make arrangements—for the whole summer if that would please you.' And then he added as an inconsequential afterthought, 'Of course payment will have to be made in advance.'

'Oh, would you? Would you?' The emotion produced by this unforeseen gesture of kindness actually made her tremble. 'That would be so good of you.'

Mr. Willoughby watched her in dismay. For a moment

he feared this skinny creature might burst into tears of gratitude.

Instead, her instability revealed itself in another way. Smiling slightly, she closed her eyes once more and seemed almost to go into a trance. 'A house by the sea. Of course. I should have thought of that. How lovely it would be to awaken in the morning and hear the sound of the waves beating against the shore. I wouldn't mind getting up early then. And sometimes I could hire a boat and sail far out to sea, couldn't I?'

'Indeed you could,' replied Mr. Willoughby, his faith in himself, which had been buffeted so cruelly in the past few days, warmly returning again. After all, hadn't he always landed on his feet? Reaching over, he took one of her hands. He discovered to his distaste that it was not only bony but cold. 'You don't look as if you've been well. You must watch your health above everything.'

After a moment she withdrew her hand and placed it against her forehead. 'Yes, I'm not well. You realize that, don't you? Sometimes I feel as if—as if I were withdrawn completely out of my own body. And these headaches! I shall need a great deal of attention. You're the only friend I have left now.'

Something overly plaintive in her tone made him grow uneasy. His intuition warned him that this woman wanted far more than she was willing to give in return. He attempted a reassuring remark, but she didn't even hear him. Her face clouded slightly. Although her eyes were open, he had the weird feeling that he'd slipped completely out of her focus and temporarily had no existence. Her voice was like an echo.

'There are so many evil people loose in the world.'

He coughed deliberately several times. When she finally recognized him again, he sought to hold her erratic attention by going into the details of the journey.

'Now, as to reservations. As I mentioned, payment will have to be made in advance. I don't suppose you intend to take your maid.'

'Maid?' She looked puzzled. 'I have no maid.'

His hand gave a spasmodic jerk. He might have known it. She'd been pulling his leg all along. He could hardly keep from jumping up indignantly as the word *impostor* formed noiselessly on his lips. What he had taken for an old-fashioned woman was only a woman in old clothes. It was outrageous.

However, too soon his indignation was replaced by cold despair. His face sagged, and suddenly he looked much older. Picking up his wine glass, he scrutinized it glumly for a moment before murmuring:

'This is the essence of all I've ever detested—drinking cheap wine out of a cheap glass.'

He had not spoken out of intent to wound. Rather, his words were meant as a summation of his life's principles. Myra, still thinking the game was on, met the remark with a sprightly suggestion.

'Perhaps you'd rather have beer?'

He sent her a savage glance. He suspected she was secretly laughing at him. Never before, even on bitter occasions, had his basic good manners failed him. But this time, in his overwhelming disappointment, he was unable to hold back what he felt. He arose and glared down at her savagely.

'What kind of a fool do you think I am, you neurotic hag?'

Myra gave a little cry, and her hand darted to her mouth. Perhaps she intended to speak, but he was already walking briskly to the door. He opened it and went out without glancing back.

Three times he knocked on Mrs. Pettigrew's door without response. His heart sank. Was it possible she had already gone to the police? He couldn't believe that he had played his hand so badly, but anything was possible after that ridiculous farce downstairs. Perhaps he hadn't rapped loudly enough. He reached out and knocked again, louder than before. Still no sign of life. Frowning, he turned away and walked slowly down the steps.

## 10

Sitting at the counter of a downtown café, Catherine Pettigrew sipped her coffee without haste. She was in no hurry to leave this place, particularly if it meant walking the ten dark blocks back to Trenton Street, and so far she hadn't succeeded in getting a taxi by phone. At least she felt safe here. Her forced coolness in the presence of that man had begun to break down the moment he left her. She had thought it might lift her spirits to get a bite to eat. But she couldn't stay here forever. After paying her check, she tried once more to call a taxi, but at this hour on a Friday night they could give her no assurances. Her only chance was to hail one on the street.

A cab approached from the south. Stepping to the

curb, she raised her arm, but it moved on swiftly. Catherine knew she might wait for a long time without success. She began to walk slowly, still hoping she might find a cab soon. At the end of the second block, the respectable business district ended with an abruptness that was almost indecent. It seemed literally so in the daytime, when ladies sitting in the Embassy Cocktail lounge could look across the street at the unshaven floaters loitering in front of the pool room. By established custom, a woman with a passable face and a good pair of legs was on her own after she crossed Hughes Street. Not that she was in much danger of being actually molested, but any snickering remarks that assaulted her ears from here on were considered part of the atmosphere. The curious thing was that well-traveled young ladies from the West End, who had strolled through much more sordid sections of Paris with a confident sense of cultural improvement, would not have walked below Hughes Street on a dare. But, of course, here the comments were not made in French.

Catherine did not hurry. She knew there was nothing to be afraid of for the time being. It was the thought of the long, dark blocks yet to come that stirred within her a vague foreboding. This district of cheap bars, curio shops and dingy, six-stool cafés was really only a buffer between the business district proper and the section of warehouses which stretched for six or seven blocks toward the river. To the less discriminating the night spots that bordered on Hughes Street offered an entertainment similar to the more pretentious downtown night clubs, without the high prices. The atmosphere was less refined, but the liquor was the same. The



gentleman at the Whitestone, who paid fifty cents for a bottle of beer, stared with increasingly bleary eyes at the same label as the man three blocks down the street who got his for a quarter. As for Mrs. Pettigrew—she felt a comforting friendliness in the bright, colored lights, and in the blatant music coming from the bars. The noise was loud and cheerful. Inside, people were laughing boisterously. But at the end of the block, she saw the darkness deepen sharply where the street angled off toward the river. She paused under the marquee of a small, third-run movie house, pretending to study the posters. It was still not too late to take the long way home by way of Burle Street, but the advantage was questionable. Moreover, the heat as well as the nervous anxiety of the past two days had left her with little energy to spare.

A door opened, and a thin, sallow-faced girl emerged from the theater with a soldier on each arm. She stopped, and one of the soldiers lit her cigarette. The other appraised Mrs. Pettigrew with overt interest.

Catherine avoided his eye, but it was not enough. She saw his glass-reflected image stealthily nudge that of his buddy. Straightening his hat, the soldier stepped forward. He carried his shoulders with the unnatural stiffness which is often affected by men in uniform, and yet, oddly enough, usually has nothing to do with pride in the uniform itself.

‘That’s my favorite actor,’ he remarked, pointing to a picture of John Wayne.

Mrs. Pettigrew knew that he was shrewdly trying to catch her eye in the glass, but she did nothing to signify that she had even noticed him.

It must have become obvious to the soldier that the time for subtlety had passed. As she started to walk away, he boldly touched her arm.

'What's the big rush?'

Mrs. Pettigrew continued on without deigning an answer. But after two steps, he was beside her again.

'Maybe we're goin' the same way,' the soldier suggested.

'I hardly think so,' she said coldly.

His shrug was overly nonchalant. 'It's a public sidewalk.'

Catherine favored the soldier with a brief, curious glance. He was tall and homely, and very young—so nondescript looking that his imposition was almost laughable. For a moment she toyed with the notion of accepting a military convoy home. It would be easy to get rid of him once they got to the apartment house, she didn't doubt that. But she could not make herself be that unscrupulous. At the corner Mrs. Pettigrew halted. She nodded toward the waiting soldier and his girl who were still standing under the marquee.

'Better go join your friends, son. You're wasting your time.'

The cold finality of her words caused the soldier to flinch. His defiant grin was so transparently counterfeit that she felt sorry for the boy. She wanted to tell him she wasn't angry. But he was already walking away with a slight swagger—the professional man of arms who takes reversal of fortune in his stride. Catherine watched him go with a sinking heart. She was alone again.

After crossing the street, she began to walk more

rapidly. At this hour the warehouse district was the most deserted part of town. The brick streets had been laid down in the city's youth ; motorists avoided them except on business. The uniformity of the squat, silent buildings gave to this section at night the desolate appearance of an abandoned army camp. Because there were no sidewalks, only loading ramps, Catherine was compelled to walk down the middle of the street, and with each step the deepening shadows seemed to gather about her. She tried to make herself walk faster, but she quickly lost her breath and had to pause. She wiped the perspiration from her face. It seemed to her that the heat had a heavy, unnatural quality, as if it didn't belong here in the darkness. The convivial hubbub of Hughes Street grew fainter, and at last merged into a single, muted note. Somewhere in the distance an automobile horn blew twice. Then there was only the sound of her own footsteps which reverberated dully in that narrow, empty street. Catherine listened to the sound, and then she listened more carefully.

An odd, muffled, out-of-phase beat entered where the silence should have been. It took her several seconds to comprehend the meaning of this new sound, and when she did, she felt the chilling impact of sudden terror. She turned around in time to see a figure press swiftly against the ramp. Catherine stiffened. She strained with all her power to wrest from the toneless shadows whatever it was they concealed, but they gave up nothing. For a moment it seemed that she would faint, and then she noticed, as if from a great distance, that her legs were moving again. It was only four blocks now to Trenton Street. As her feet moved faster, so did

those of the man behind her. She wanted to run, but something told her this was not the thing to do. From a stack of cartons along the ramp came the sweet, rotten odor of decaying cantaloupe.

Suddenly, at the end of the block Catherine saw a pale stream of light reach across her path. As it grew stronger, she heard the low hum of an automobile engine. She began to run now. If only she could make it to the corner before the car passed! Her breath came in short, frantic gasps that seared her lungs, and for the first time in years she vividly remembered the terror of running for her life as a child in London the night before she was evacuated. The lights grew more brilliant. If she could just make her legs move a little faster, a little faster . . .

The car roared into the intersection, its headlights fanning out into the dark street. Catherine was still ten yards away. A flood of light rushed in to meet her, very briefly illuminated her outstretched hand, then was gone. She took four or five more staggering steps and fell. Even as her knee struck the ground, she gave a low, sobbing cry, knowing it was too late.

A hand touched her shoulder. She looked up to see two figures standing above her. One was a man in some kind of uniform. Beside him was a woman, also wearing a uniform. Then she made out a dimly illuminated sign in a window across the street. *Salvation Army*.

'Hurt yourself, miss?' the man asked.

She was struggling to get her breath as he helped her up. 'Not much, thank you. I wrenched my ankle a little.'

'Do you live far?'

'Only about three blocks. Would it be asking too much if——'

'Not at all. Take the young lady's arm, Miss Barratt.'

## 11

Nine o'clock. Although the sun had gone down nearly an hour ago, the temperature had retreated by only a few degrees from its afternoon peak. By this time something of the atmosphere of an occupied city had settled over the sprawling metropolis. Since there was no escape, people could only wait for the invader to move on. And so they waited, some stoically, some with profane expressions of impatience. Was there really any sign anywhere within the hundred-odd square miles that for someone this night might end in terror, violence and murder?

At the Castle Hill Hotel the desk clerk summoned the bellman who sat fanning himself in a wicker chair.

'Tell Walter to come up here, will you? There's some rubbish in the third floor corridor that'd ought to be carried out right away.'

The bellman disappeared, but he returned after a few minutes, alone.

'Can't seem to locate him. He ain't in the basement.'

'Did you look in the kitchen?'

'Not there either.'

The desk clerk frowned. 'That's funny. It's not like Walter to be running around at night. Have any idea where he could be?'

The other shook his head. 'Walter's usually in bed by nine o'clock. I s'pose it's the heat.'

'Well, I don't like it. Out by himself this time of the night. He could get in trouble.'

A few blocks away, Roy Oblonski drooped heavily against the bar, his chin resting on his clenched fist. He was staring at the space in front of him, but he didn't appear to see any of it. Certainly far less was he aware that he was making a spectacle of himself. An argument seemed to be going on between Roy and some visionary enemy, carried on sporadically, but with considerable bitterness. People nudged one another and smiled. It was more amusing and certainly more sincere than the wrestling match on the television set.

Somewhere near him a woman tittered. Roy's head snapped up as he searched glassily for the source of the laughter. When he failed to find it, he returned to his own private struggle. The substance of his dispute made no sense even to those who were close enough to listen. But certain phrases floated up time after time.

'Oughta be dead,' he muttered. And 'Cheap whore.' And 'No business bein' 'live.'

The spectators grinned, all except one solemn man with a thin face and a tiny mustache, who watched the demonstrative drunk with increasing thoughtfulness.

After a while, Roy swung away from the bar. As he started toward the door, someone jokingly called out to him, but he didn't turn around. His gait was surprisingly steady, considering his appearance. When he was outside, he didn't hesitate. He turned left, toward the river, toward Trenton Street.

The man with the thin face looked genuinely worried. He beckoned to the bartender.

'Say, there's something funny about that guy.'

'He's looped,' the bartender explained simply.

'More than that, though. He's in an ugly mood. He could cause trouble.'

'Him?'

'I mean it. I wonder if I should call the police.'

The bartender only scoffed. 'Hell, I see guys like that every day. Had trouble with the boss, more than likely. He'll go home, kick the old lady a couple of times, and wake up tomorrow meek as a kitten. Take my word for it.'

The man seemed to waver. 'S'pose you're right.'

'Sure, I'm right. Like I tell you, if you'd seen as many of them guys as I have, you wouldn't even give it a thought.'

## 12

Now, in the last hours of Friday night, Catherine Pettigrew was alone. She would have pulled down the shades, but the heat was almost more than she could bear. Every time she drew a breath, she seemed to be sucking back the damp, spent air from her own lungs. Despite her apparent safety behind the locked door, she could not drive from her mind the notion that something was about to happen. This foreboding did not take specific form, but rather suffused her with a corroding anxiety which caused her to stiffen at the slightest noise. Such a state of mind made writing the letter a difficult task. The words she sought did not come readily, and several times she tore up the sheet, only to start anew. Because she could not keep her

fingers from trembling, the jerky handwriting scarcely resembled her own.

Catherine remembered then something she intended to do earlier. When she had hysterically thrown out the roses, she had broken the rusty catch which locked the screen. This mishap in no way reduced her security, since the ledge was above the grasp of the tallest man. Nevertheless, she found a hammer in the closet and drove a long nail through the screen frame. Satisfied, she returned to the desk.

The fact that she had no idea what might threaten her, or why, merely seemed to make the danger more genuine. Lingering on this, she tried to find comfort in recalling other times when she had been just as certain some gruesome fate awaited her, only to have nothing happen at all. But these reminiscences took her far back to childhood when every dancing shadow signified the menacing approach of a fairy-tale monster. Strangely enough, though one might have supposed otherwise, the recollection that she had once actually gotten sick with fear of a purely make-believe ogre, had the effect of making her more uneasy than before.

She wiped her arm undaintily across her moist forehead. Now she was reminded of other stories—of men in the jungle who had gone mad with the heat. Always it was the man. His wife sat coolly on the veranda, fanning herself with a palm leaf, and when he had died in convulsions, she went with her lover back to England. What of the man Catherine had seen in the park, the one who had watched her that day from the street? He was a maniac, surely. Had he been the one who followed her in the darkness? She thought once more



of calling the police. However, if she were asked to swear on it, she knew she couldn't be absolutely positive there had been anyone at all.

The pen point had gone dry. She shook it, made a scratch on the back of a blotter, and proceeded with the letter. Becoming absorbed with something outside oneself—that was the usual recommended way to dispel anxiety. The only trouble was that, in this case, the activity dealt with the very source of her fear. Nevertheless, she tried. Then the rhythmic dripping of the kitchen faucet began to intrude itself on the silence. The leaky tap had never bothered her before. Now she listened compulsively. The drops of water struck like short footfalls of time marching toward what predetermined appointment?

Flinging down the pen, she covered her face with her hands. 'Oh, Charles, Charles,' she moaned. 'When are you coming home?'

It was almost at this exact moment that little Mrs. Pettigrew discovered she was not alone in the apartment.

At first, when she heard the sound, she thought it was the breeze rustling the curtain. Slowly she drew her hands away from her face. But there was no breeze. The air was absolutely still. She listened, desperately hoping she wouldn't hear it again. Then it returned, fading in and out—the hoarse, uneven breathing of someone close by. Whoever it was sounded near enough to reach out and take her by the throat.

For a horrified instant, so hyperactive was her imagination, Catherine believed he really had seized her. She thrust her head forward and wriggled to her feet as

though twisting out of his grasp. But when she looked around, there was no one. Yet she could hear him still. It meant he could only be in the kitchen, since the bedroom was too far away. The shocking realization flashed into her mind then that, beyond doubt, someone meant to kill her.

Perhaps the anguish caused by the earlier incident and the memories of her childhood fears had been a fortunate thing. This new terror found her already well past the threshold of fright. She was able to subdue the panic that gripped her, at least to the extent that she was still in control of herself physically. If she could make it to the door, there might yet be a chance. But she would have to move casually as if she only intended to turn on the radio. Was it possible he didn't realize she had found him out? This would be all that could save her. Only she couldn't really believe the violent pounding of her heart would not give her away.

As she neared the door, the sound grew louder. Then just as she was reaching for the knob, Catherine understood where the noise was coming from. He was standing on the other side of the locked door.

Immediately she stepped over and picked up the phone; but a better idea occurred to her.

'Who is it?' she demanded. 'Who's at the door?'

'Me.'

As she resettled the phone, she went limp with relief. Thank Heavens. It was only Mrs. Folger.

However, when she opened the door, Catherine could not restrain a gasp. 'Really, ought you to be up?'

Myra was indeed a piteous sight. Perspiration or tears had marred her make-up, leaving only pink streaks to accentuate the hollows of her haggard face. After some hesitation, she crossed the threshold.

'Sit down,' Catherine invited.

Myra seemed unwilling to take the chair that was offered. Instead, she stood near the wall watching the other suspiciously out of eyes that appeared to have receded even deeper into her skull.

'Won't you have a seat?' Catherine insisted. 'You look so tired.'

Furtively, like a child who half suspects he is being tricked, Myra slipped into the rocking chair. Not once did she take her eyes off the younger woman.

Even considering her guest's cheerless manner, Catherine was pleased to have someone to talk to. 'If this heat would only let up. We've all suffered so, and there's nothing . . .'

'You've suffered!'

Startled, Catherine caught her breath as the hoarse savagery of the other's words shattered her effort at sociable conversation. She frowned. There was something about the way Mrs. Folger was acting lately that she didn't like at all. And the way she stared! With those eyes of hers, it was enough to give a person goose flesh.

'Let me fix some tea,' Catherine said. 'I won't be a minute.'

In the kitchen she noticed that her hands were trembling again. Was it conceivable that she was afraid of Mrs. Folger too? Up to this moment, such a fantastic thought had not framed itself into a question. Now that

it had, this notion joined all the other insidious forces working to unnerve her, and had the immediate physical effect of causing her to spill some tea leaves. There was no plausible reason for such a fear, but in her present state of mind, Catherine needed none. She glanced into the living-room and inevitably met Myra's gaze. Catherine shivered. Where could one turn when there was evil within as well as without? For a moment she considered fleeing to the Salvation Army shelter and summoning the police from there. She considered it, but not with much seriousness.

It might have been for the better if she had.

By the time she returned to the living-room, Catherine had already come to rational terms with this latest fancy. It was her nerves. That was all. Afraid of Mrs. Folger! Really! She'd might as well be afraid of Mr. Oblonski. Roy Oblonski—the sheer absurdity of this offered a spell of comic relief. She was even smiling as she set down the pot of tea.

‘I'll get some cups.’

For the cups Catherine went to the cabinet where she kept her few pieces of fine china. In her haste, she did not bother to close the door. This would have been an oversight of no importance, except that it was in this cabinet that she had set Myra's bottle of poison, which stood now exposed to view.

Catherine drew up her chair opposite her guest's. ‘It's fortunate you don't take cream in your tea,’ she remarked as she filled the first cup. ‘I haven't a drop in the—— Why, Mrs. Folger, what is it?’

The consummate horror of Myra's expression communicated itself like a flash of gunpowder to the jittery

Mrs. Pettigrew. Her instantaneous assumption was that her guest beheld some brute crawling through the window. Leaping up, Catherine swung around, the better to defend herself with a cup of scalding tea. But she saw everything her guest could possibly see, and this was plainly nothing.

Of the two of them, it was evidently Mrs. Folger whose nerves most needed to be soothed. 'Drink this,' Catherine invited. 'It'll make you feel better.'

With a guttural cry, scarcely human, Myra drew back from the tainted cup. As she did so, her features began to twitch and grimace in a way that made her look quite dreadful. Slowly she forced herself to her feet.

Catherine Pettigrew, too stupefied by this weird performance to decide what her own reaction should be, still stood with the cup extended. 'Really, you should get something into your stomach. You're not yourself at all.'

For answer, Myra reached out and hit the cup with such a violent blow that it shattered in mid-air, spraying them both with the hot liquid.

Catherine screamed, less out of fear or pain than utter surprise at something so unexpected. If in the interval that followed she had bolted for the door, safety might yet have been within reach. But she did not think of this until Mrs. Folger, laying hold of the hammer on the window sill, turned back to face her. Then it was too late.

Feeling her legs grow weak, Catherine grasped the back of the chair, almost as if the stunning weapon had already struck. She tried to speak, but her lips, frozen

in terror, emitted not a sound. Mutely she watched Myra, her face working grotesquely, move forward with deliberate step, the hammer raised in ill-boding readiness. There could be ~~be only~~ one outcome. Even considering her frailness, she had half a foot and twenty pounds on the little English girl.

'Oh please . . . Mrs. Folger, you're not well.'

Having at last found her voice, her only weapon, Catherine continued to plead as she shrank back. Even a mad dog might pause at a friendly word.

'Listen to me! Don't you know who I am? You're not well, Mrs. Folger. Please let me call the doctor.'

The pathetic conviction that her words were actually holding the attacker at bay was all that kept her from crying out. 'Myra, you can't know what you're doing. It's the heat. For God's sake, put that down and we'll get you to the hospital. Can't you understand, you're not yourself?' Sensing the nearness of the wall behind her, the pursued woman's tone became less supplicatory, more frenzied, but still the other came on, neither hastening nor pausing.

In what would have been the last step of her frantic retreat, Catherine's arm, by fortunate chance rather than intent, struck the desk lamp, sending it crashing to the floor. Momentarily, the darkness invading the room with such unforeseen abruptness compelled the stunned attention of both assailant and quarry. Not knowing where to move, neither of them moved. Then Catherine's brain began functioning again. Slipping around the edge of the desk, she avoided the place where Mrs. Folger must be, and darted toward the door. Familiarity with the room permitted her to find

the knob with ease, but even unlocked, the door did not open more than an inch. A snake-like stroke across her cheek produced a sensation so ghastly she nearly fainted. Mrs. Folger, groping for the switch, had found instead Catherine Pettigrew's face. In a spasm of terror, the English girl scrambled away, shrieking with all the power of her lungs. Driven only by the hideous revulsion which compounded her fright, her motions followed no plan. When the light flashed on, she was standing with a wall pressed against each shoulder, finally, inextricably cornered.

Myra moved swiftly. Watching the hammer rise to commence its gruesome assignment, Catherine uttered no sound. Mercifully, the figure before her eyes grew indistinct. To the last instant of consciousness she did not quite relinquish hope. Without extended preparation, no man can believe in his own death. Just as in a bad dream some unpersuaded portion of the mind waits serenely to be delivered from the nightmare, so did something in Catherine's mind insist that no scene so horrible as this could exist outside the imagination. .

The hammer obeyed more direct physical laws. Impelled by the dual forces of gravity and muscle, it started to descend. However, having had no practice with tools, Myra possessed lamentable coordination. The hammer bit deeply into the plaster, and then, its energy all but gone, glanced off the victim's shoulder. Diverted in this way, it was an ineffectual blow, but feeling it, Catherine knew with a fatal certainty that this was no dream. She collapsed noiselessly to the floor.

With an inert target thus presented to her, Myra had

no need for haste. She stood in a semi-crouch, the hammer upraised. If she was searching for some fitting words to accompany the *coup de grâce*, she never got a chance to utter them. She must have heard the footsteps behind her, but she didn't even have time to look around. In three strides, Walter had reached her. His long fingers slipped easily around her thin throat. Myra did not struggle, nor gasp, nor cry out, nor beg for mercy—for in one brutal thrust her neck was broken.

Walter continued to choke the lifeless woman until he noticed Catherine Pettigrew feebly move her head. Only then did he lose interest in what he was doing. Without offering to touch her, he bent over the unconscious girl and waited motionlessly for her eyes to open. He stayed in this watchful position for several minutes. Still she did not awaken. He might have intended to remain so, for the rest of the night if that were necessary, had he not heard someone coming up the steps.

Roy Oblonski, drunk as he was, managed to climb the stairs with moderate agility. At the top, he steadied himself and looked around. Observing Mrs. Pettigrew's open door, he lurched forward to investigate. What followed as an anticlimax to the harrowing events of that evening very nearly slipped over into the realm of comedy, though it likely did not seem so to either of the participants. For a brief moment the two men looked at each other, one no less appalled than the other. Perhaps Walter's uncomplicated mind did not comprehend the possibility that, having killed, he might escape punishment if caught. He was a stranger to the complexities of law. The only dependable sanctuary he



had ever known was his basement room under the Castle Hill Hotel. To reach it, he had to get down the stairs and onto the street. Springing up, he charged like a stampeded animal toward the door.

Before the onrushing intruder, Roy Oblonski was faced with a primitive choice. He could strike or he could run. What it was that caused him to strike, when all his life he had run, would have been difficult to assess. With superlative luck in timing, he caught his man squarely on the point of the jaw. Walter dropped senseless at the feet of the astonished student. His heroics over, Roy Oblonski staggered off to his own room and vomited into the sink.

When Catherine Pettigrew opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the body of Mrs. Folger sprawled crookedly beside her. The grisly mark of death was too obvious to be mistaken, even though she did not yet know its cause. Forcing herself to get up, she walked in a daze to the telephone. Only after she had called the police did it occur to her to be thankful for being alive, or to wonder at her deliverance. As her brain cleared, she became possessed by one thought—to get away from this awful place. Not until she started toward the door did she notice Walter lying in the hallway. What this meant she had no idea, and at that moment she had no wish to find out. Stepping across his legs, she ran along the corridor, down the stairs, and out into the darkness.

She did not know why she ran. She was no longer fleeing from death, nor was she hurrying toward any known destination. It was not this thought which finally made her pause, but something else. A sudden, cool

rush of air against her cheek brought her, stumbling, to a halt. Looking off toward the western sky, she saw a flash of lightning, and then another. Catherine sighed. By morning the heat wave would be over.

THE END